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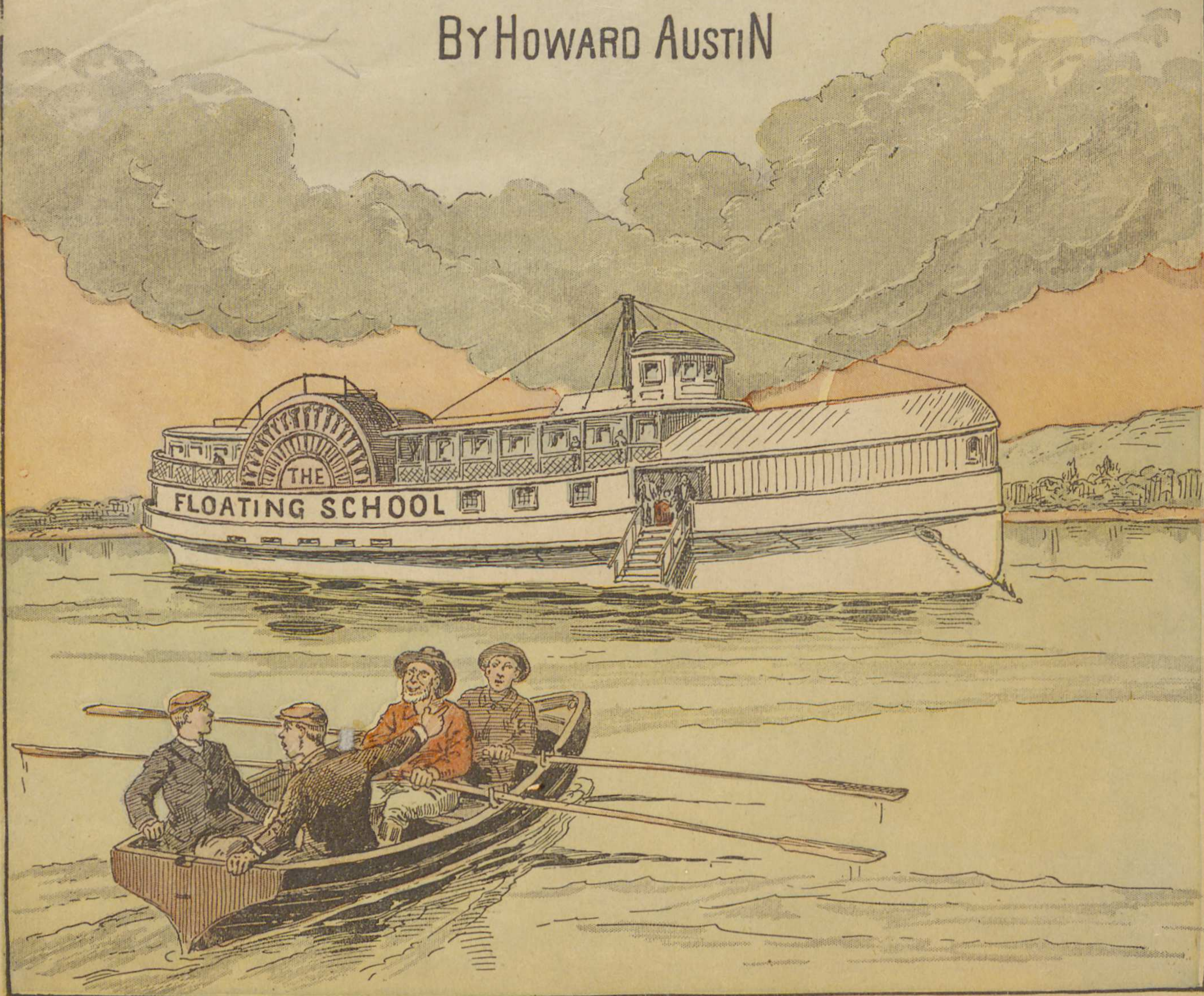
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No. 73.

NEW YORK, OCTOBER 25, 1899.

Price 5 Cents.

THE FLOATING SCHOOL; OR DR. BIRCHAM'S BAD BOYS' ACADEMY. BY HOWARD AUSTIN



The fisherman and his son rowed straight toward the Floating School. "Hello! There's Dr. Bircham's Floating School, which we've heard so much about," cried Tom.

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CHAPTER I.

TWO BAD BOYS AND THEIR UNCLE.

Barton Sax, the lawyer, and his clerk, one Eric Lee, a fine young man who had been in his service for some time, were alone in Sax's office.

The attorney stood well in the community where he dwelt, and was intrusted with a great deal of important business by his townsmen.

The people of the town of Valeville were indeed quite proud of Barton Sax, because he had been elected to the State legislature, and his political influence had secured some public improvements of importance for his native place.

The great swamp, north of Boone Lake, a large sheet of water near the town, had been drained at the expense of the State. A fine court house had been built in the public square of the town, and Barton Sax was the man who had brought it all about.

Now while Barton Sax was so well known, and well liked in Valeville, the humble clerk, Eric Lee, was almost a stranger there, and he had but few friends.

Eric had come from a distant part of the State, and being of a rather retiring disposition, and devoting all his spare time to the study of his chosen profession, the law, he had not gained much of a social foothold in Valeville.

Barton Sax was a large, pompous, showily dressed man, and Eric was a slender, modestly attired youth with the general appearance of a student.

The two men presented a marked contrast as the burly lawyer stood towering above his clerk, with one hand raised half menacingly at the moment we look in upon them.

"Why, you miserable ingrate! Is this the way in which you repay me for what I have done? Is this your gratitude for the favor I have done you in allowing you to read law with me? Me, the Honorable Barton Sax, Esq!" the irate lawyer was saying.

"I am not an ingrate, sir. But I do not acknowledge myself

indebted to you in any way. You wanted a clerk. I agreed to serve you in that capacity in return for the privilege of reading law in your office. I have saved you a clerk's salary," replied Eric Lee, spiritedly.

"Indeed! Indeed! Then let me tell you, young man, there is more than one law student in town who would be willing to pay well for the privilege of reading law with the Honorable Barton Sax. But do you really mean to refuse to make the copy of those papers as I desire?"

"Yes, sir. It would be forgery, sir, and I will have no hand in wronging your lost brother's fatherless boys."

As he spoke Eric arose from the desk at which he had been seated and pushed some documents thereon toward the lawyer.

"This to me? By heavens! you young rascal, I see too late that I have made a mistake in trusting you as I have done. I suppose now you may have it in your mind to betray me, but let me warn you if you dare to breathe or hint of any of the secrets you have obtained a knowledge of since you entered my office I'll ruin you for life!"

"You need not threaten me, I——"

"Hush!" interrupted the lawyer as the sound of footsteps and boyish voices were heard from without. "Tom and Frank are coming now. Not a word before them. We will come to a better understanding presently. I am sure you have somewhat misunderstood me."

Eric made no reply, but he again became seated at his desk, and almost immediately the office door opened and two bright, handsome, manly-looking boys of about fifteen and seventeen years of age entered.

The two lads were the sons of Barton Sax's brother, a sea captain, who was supposed to have been lost at sea with all on board his vessel some months previously.

Captain Jerrold Sax, the boys' father, had always been reputed comfortably wealthy; the lads' mother had died years previously, and the two sons were the captain's only heirs in the direct line.

When Captain Jerrold sailed on his last voyage he has left his sons in the care of their uncle, Barton Sax, who was a

widower with one son, a scapegrace whose whereabouts his father was now ignorant of.

Tom Sax was the elder of the two brothers. Frank was, however, often taken to be older than his brother, for he was large for his age, while Tom was a trifle undersized.

Both boys were very lively and full of fun and mischief as an egg is of meat. They were always perpetrating practical jokes and up to some nonsense.

At the old ladies' tea parties in town the verdict was often pronounced that "Tom and Frank Sax were very bad boys."

But that wasn't true of them. They never did anything really bad. They had good hearts, were full of noble impulses, but they were far from believing it was their duty to go through this life as if they were part of a funeral procession.

Miss Minerva Sharp, the old maid female suffrage advocate, was wont to pleasantly prophesy:

"Them Sax boys will come to some bad ind yit, an' it wouldn't 'sprise me a mite if they come to the gallus."

Miss Minerva, it may be mentioned parenthetically, was a victim of several of the boys' jokes, and she did not love them with that forgiving Christian spirit which she should have felt to carry out the maxim she was fond of making use of: "Love thine enemies."

"Well, boys, you are here in good time. It is not yet quite six o'clock, the hour I mentioned for your coming," said the lawyer, as his nephews entered the office.

"Nothing like being on time, uncle," replied Tom.

"As the shop-lifter said when she stuffed her bustle with watches," put in Frank.

Barton Sax frowned. He was a man who never liked to laugh, and just then his mind was too full of a dark and villainous plot against the orphan boys to give room for mirth.

"Lee, you may retire. I have some business matters of a private nature to discuss with my dear nephews," said the lawyer.

"Very well, sir," replied the clerk, and taking up his hat, he passed out of the office.

Meanwhile Frank took the chair at the desk which Eric Lee had vacated, and glancing at the papers which the clerk had just refused to copy, he saw his father's name on one of the documents.

"Why, here is my father's name on this paper! What is it, Uncle Barton?" said the lad, reaching out for the paper.

"Nothing, nothing—that is, nothing of any importance!" exclaimed the lawyer, suddenly darting forward and snatching up the papers before Frank could touch them.

Barton Sax betrayed a degree of agitation which surprised the boys. They were bright enough to think there was something here that their uncle sought to conceal.

But neither said so, though they exchanged glances.

The lawyer put the papers in his safe and locked the door.

Then he turned to the boys again, saying:

"The time has come, boys, for me to explain what may somewhat surprise you. You are no doubt aware that it is the general opinion that your dear father left you very comfortably well off. Is not this so?"

"Yes, sir."

"Certainly, uncle."

The boys made the replies promptly, and Barton Sax continued:

"As is often the case, however, public opinion is in this instance entirely wrong. The fact is, my dear boys, your father was really worth very little at the time of his death."

"Do you mean then that Frank and I are poor?" asked Tom.

"Yes, I have taken out letters of administration and have begun to settle up your father's affairs. I find that by the time all his outstanding debts have been paid there will be little, if anything, left for you."

"This is indeed a surprise, uncle!" exclaimed Tom.

"And by no means an agreeable one," added Frank.

"So I presume. But I deemed it best that you should no longer be kept in ignorance of the real truth."

"And father made no will!" asked Tom.

"No, I have so assured you all along," replied the lawyer, and curiously enough the bright lads observed that he seemingly involuntarily glanced at the safe.

"I wish now to tell you boys that it will become very soon a necessity that you should adopt some means of self-support. Of course you can continue to make your home at my house while you are looking about you and deciding what you will do," added the lawyer.

"You are very kind," replied Tom, dryly.

"So very good of you, dear uncle," said Frank.

Some way, quite correctly, the lawyer seemed to suspect the lads were speaking ironically, for he flushed a trifle as he said with some asperity:

"I hope you know I am your only real friend. Now you may go. The sooner you find out there is something besides fun and mischief in life, the better."

The boys quietly bowed themselves out of the office.

"There's a large sized coon in the wood-pile, I'll bet," said Tom, when they were outside.

"I smell more than one mice. Uncle Barton is up to some trickery. I wonder if he is trying to defraud us? I can't help suspecting such a thing," replied Frank.

"Well, we might as well laugh as cry. We're the two orphans of a real life drama. If Uncle Barton is the villain of the play we've got to outwit him alone."

"Right you are, Tom, for every man, woman and child in town is an admirer of the 'Honorable Barton Sax,' and you couldn't make any one believe anything wrong of him."

The boys walked rapidly away from the office.

When they were out of sight Eric Lee came out of an empty room adjoining Lawyer Barton Sax's office.

The clerk had been listening at the door during all the time the boys were in his employer's office, and he had hastily withdrawn when the boys came out, and concealed himself in the unoccupied apartment.

Eric re-entered the office at once.

"What! Back so soon, Lee. You could not have gone far," said the lawyer, pausing in a nervous walk up and down the room as the clerk reappeared.

"No, I did not go far. Now, Barton Sax, I have formed a resolution from which nothing can turn me," replied Lee.

"What do you mean? What resolve have you made?" demanded Sax.

"That I will not remain silent and see your brother's sons defrauded."

"What! Would you expose me?"

"Yes, unless you are willing to render the boys who were left in your care a just account of their inheritance."

"Fool! You dare not accuse me publicly!"

"I dare and I will."

"Never! Curse you, you have shown your hand too soon!" cried the lawyer, now livid with rage, and as he spoke he rushed at Eric Lee furiously and seized the young man by the throat.

A struggle ensued.

Eric Lee found that he must defend himself desperately against the murderous attack, or he feared the lawyer might kill him in the heat of his passion.

Barton Sax was more powerful than Eric, but the young man was more lithe and quick than his assailant.

He managed to free himself from the lawyer's hold. At that moment Barton Sax made a movement as if to draw a revolver, which the clerk knew he always carried.

Believing his life depended upon the blow, Eric then dealt his antagonist a lightning-like blow between the eyes.

Barton Sax reeled and fell. His head struck the corner of a marble mantel as he went down, and cut an ugly gash in the scalp upon it.

Leaving the lawyer bleeding upon the floor, Eric darted from the office.

But he had not gone far when he decided to return and face the consequences of the blow he had struck. The young man was on his way back to the office, when he met Frank and Tom Sax.

"I will tell the boys the truth," said Eric, mentally. But at that moment Barton Sax and a police officer came in sight.

CHAPTER II.

A FALSE ACCUSATION—BARTON SAX CALLS ON DR. BIRCHAM.

"There he is, officer! There he is! Arrest the young rascal who robbed my safe and attempted to murder me!" shouted Barton Sax, as he saw Eric.

The young clerk was astonished and alarmed. It flashed upon his mind that Barton Sax had made a terrible charge against him.

He comprehended that the villain was bent upon making good his threat that he would ruin him if he dared to expose any of his dark secrets.

While the police officer and Barton Sax hastened toward him Eric thought rapidly. He knew that his enemy's word was considered as good as most men's bond.

The young man felt convinced that the lawyer would swear away his liberty and his good name. That he would, if arrested, be convicted of the terrible crime of which he was unjustly accused.

The impulse for flight was strong upon him. If he would escape there was not a moment to lose. He could not tarry then to reveal to the orphans of the lost sea captain what he knew of their uncle's villainy in full.

But Eric spoke a few hurried words.

"I want to warn you against your uncle. He means to defraud you. Beware of him lest he may yet seek to do you both bodily harm," cried the young man.

Then as he bounded away he added:

"Do not think hardly of me. I am innocent of any wrong, Barton Sax to the contrary."

As Eric fled the pursuing police officer called out to him:

"Halt! I command you to halt! I have a warrant for your arrest!"

But Eric kept on, and the policeman, instigated by Barton Sax, whose influence the local officer valued highly, drew his revolver and again shouted to the fugitive:

"Halt or I fire!"

Just then Eric was turning a corner, and he had started to cross the street diagonally, when a rapidly-driven wagon came down upon him. Before he could get out of the way the young man was struck down by the horse, and the vehicle passed on.

The policeman, Barton Sax and the two boys ran to the young man, who lay motionless in the dusty road.

They found him bruised and bleeding, and lifting him up, they carried him into an adjacent drug store.

There Eric was revived, and it was ascertained that, after all, he had quite miraculously escaped serious injury, and the officer handcuffed the young man, weak and helpless though he now was, and dragged him away to the police station.

In less than an hour Eric was an inmate of a cell in the county jail, which was in the town, and he had been duly committed to await his trial for robbery and assault with intent to kill.

Barton Sax's "pull" with the county court made the villainous lawyer feel sure that he would have no difficulty in "rail-roading" his honest clerk to State's prison.

The lawyer had lost no time.

Shortly after Eric fled from his office Sax regained his senses, sprang to his feet and glanced about for his adversary.

Then he saw a letter on the floor which had been lost by Eric in his recent struggle.

Barton Sax snatched up the letter and examined its contents.

Then an exclamation of vindictive, jealous rage, burst from his lips, and he muttered:

"So this letter is from Ethel Worth, the old colonel's heiress. The beggarly clerk has dared to make love to the girl I mean to marry, and she favors his suit. I have been blind not to suspect the truth!"

For a moment the lawyer's face was a mirror for the reflection of his evil passions, while he thought deeply.

Then he went to the safe, hastily unlocked it, and took out a large package of money which he concealed on his person.

Without a moment's delay, after that, and leaving the safe door standing wide open, he then ran to a justice's office next door and swore out a warrant for the arrest of Eric Lee. Barton Sax told the justice that he had been assaulted from behind by Eric, knocked senseless, and that while in that condition his assailant had abstracted the safe key from his pocket and stolen eight thousand dollars in bank-notes and fled.

The lawyer's blood-stained face and wounded head bore silent testimony to the truth of his statement, and no one thought of doubting it.

When Eric Lee was hurried away to the police station, Barton Sax walked from the drug store with his two nephews.

The conspirator had seen that Eric spoke earnestly to the two lads when he met them. A suspicion of the truth was in his mind. He thought the clerk might have given the boys some knowledge of what he wished, above all things, to conceal from them.

"What did the young rascal Lee say to you when he met you, boys?" asked the lads' uncle.

"Nothing much, only that it was all a mistake, and that he had done no harm," replied Tom, innocently.

"Yes, that's just what he said," corroborated Frank.

The boys felt now that they must conceal their suspicions until they could get some real proof of their uncle's villainy.

They were quite ready to believe that their personal safety might depend upon their not allowing their uncle to find out that they believed he meant to rob them of an inheritance.

Barton Sax seemed satisfied with the reply of the boys; but he was not really so.

"I'll play spy on them, and if Lee has really told them anything of the truth I'll find it out. They are a pair of sharp and tricky youngsters, and in case I learn I have cause to fear them, I'll know how to get rid of them," reflected Barton Sax.

But the boys had no thought of what was passing in his mind. Night was now at hand, and Frank and his brother walked home with their uncle through the gloaming.

On the way Barton Sax related the story he had composed about the attempt at murder and the robbery of which he accused Eric Lee.

The boys pretended to believe it all.

That night, when Tom and Frank retired to their sleeping room in their uncle's residence, in the suburbs of the town, they conversed about the events and discoveries of the day.

"I am sure Eric Lee is innocent," said Tom.

"Yes, so am I, and I do not doubt he told the truth when he told us Uncle Barton meant to defraud us," replied Frank.

The boys continued to converse for some time.

During their conversation they voiced the plan to watch their uncle, and try to secretly get a chance to examine their lost father's private business documents and books.

When at last the boys fell asleep, a dark form stole noiselessly from the door of their chamber.

There Barton Sax had been eavesdropping. He had heard every word spoken by his nephews.

Some little time after he stole away from the door of the boys' room Barton Sax left the house.

It was a bright moonlight summer night, and the lawyer walked swiftly away to a neighboring livery stable, where he

hired a horse and buggy, and then he drove away into the country.

The lawyer took the road to Boone Lake.

He had resolved to take time by the forelock, and within twenty-four hours' time he meant to have the two boys, whom he now feared, where it would be impossible for them to injure him, surprise any secrets or find any one to believe or assist them.

Boone Lake is a sheet of fresh water miles in extent, and on it there was one of the queerest institutions ever heard of.

One Dr. Bircham, an eccentric, cranky old professor, had bought a dismantled old excursion steamer, that used formerly to run on the lake, and anchored the old craft on a reef where the water was shallow, at a distance of five miles from the nearest land.

On board the old vessel Dr. Bircham had started what he advertised by means of a widely circulated prospectus as "The Floating School, or Dr. Bircham's Bad Boys' Academy."

The prospectus set forth the fact that only "bad boys" would be received, and that the worse a boy was the more acceptable he would be to Dr. Bircham as a student. In fact, none but bad boys would be received at "the floating school."

The advantages of the institution were dwelt upon at considerable length, and a strong point was made of the fact that it would be impossible for the bad boys to run away, as there was only one or two boats on the floating school and no "student" could gain access to them.

Dr. Bircham promised a complete reformation of the worst boy that could be found or "no pay," as the patent medicine "ads" say.

Parents and guardians were invited to investigate, and that was now just what Lawyer Barton Sax was going to do.

He was bound for the floating school, and he intended that Tom and Frank Sax should become inmates of the veritable floating prison on the lake before many hours elapsed.

The lawyer had secured a pension for one of the fishermen, a surly old fellow who had served in the late war, and he went directly to his house.

Old Dan Bronson readily assented to Barton Sax's request that he should get out a boat and row him to the floating school.

A five mile pull was not much of a task for the old fisherman, and he was not long in making the distance to the academy for bay boys.

As the lawyer's boat drew near the floating hulk, his ears were assailed by the fierce barking of dogs on board, and a voice hailed him, shouting:

"What's wanted, and who are you?"

"I want to see Dr. Bircham, and I am Barton Sax," replied the lawyer.

"Then come on board. You'll find the landing ladder on the starboard side, amidship," replied the voice, and a short, thick-set man appeared at the rail on deck.

A few moments later Barton Sax was on board Dr. Bircham's famous institution, and the short, thick-set man called the proprietor of "the original and only floating institution of learning of the kind" on deck.

Dr. Bircham was a tall, thin, old fellow with a very red face and immense nose, which glowed like a headlight. His head was bald, and he was cleanly shaven. A pair of spectacles were perched on his great nose, and he had a wart like a ripe tomato on the side of it. His best friend could not conscientiously have called him handsome, and the wildest speculator would not have entered him as a prize contestant in a beauty show.

Dr. Bircham knew Barton Sax by reputation, and he declared himself to be highly honored by his visit. The two men retired to the old professor's cabin below deck, and a long conversation ensued between them.

When the lawyer finally left the old vessel it had been agreed between him and Dr. Bircham that Tom and Frank were to become inmates of the floating school the next day.

CHAPTER III.

THE BOYS ON BOARD THE FLOATING SCHOOL.

"Good morning, boys," said Barton Sax, very blandly, as Tom and Frank entered the dining-room next morning. "I hope you have had a good night's rest?"

"Excellent. I slept like a top," replied Tom.

"And I, too," said Frank, and just then he heard the rattle of wheels, and glancing through the window he saw his uncle Barton's two-seated "democrat wagon" driven up to the door by the stableman.

The lawyer kept his own turnout, though he had chosen to use a hired conveyance the preceding night, as he did not wish any one at his house to know of his visit to "Dr. Bircham's bad boys' academy."

"Going out in the country to-day, uncle? I see the wagon at the door?" asked Frank.

"Yes, I'm going out to Boone Lake. If you boys want a ride you can go along," replied Barton.

He had intended to induce the boys to accompany him, and Frank's remark gave him a chance to invite them in a natural off-hand manner.

Of course the boys accepted the invitation. It was a delightful May morning, and to have refused an excursion into the blooming country where the apple blossoms and the wild flowers perfumed the clear, bracing air, and the birds sang in every leafy bower, would have been unnatural indeed.

The lawyer drove, and only his two nephews accompanied him. On the preceding night, after he had made arrangements with Dr. Bircham to receive the boys, Sax had engaged Dan Bronson, the fisherman, to put the boys on board "The Floating School."

The lawyer's team was a swift one, and, as he drove rapidly all the way from the town, he was not long in reaching the lake.

There was a little tumbled-down tavern at once end of the fisherman's hamlet near the lake shore, and Barton Sax drove straight to that hostelry.

The team was hitched at a post, and as he and the boys alighted Sax said:

"I've got some law business to talk over with the innkeeper, and while I am engaged with him you can amuse yourselves."

The lawyer entered the inn, and an old fisherman, who was seated on a bench at the door industriously smoking a short pipe, sauntered up to the boys as they turned toward the lake shore and said:

"Maybe the young gents would like to go out for a row. I've got a prime boat and a set of fishing tackle. The pike do bite fine these mornings."

"Good enough! Get out your boat!" cried Frank, enthusiastically.

"Yes, we'll try our hand at fishing while we're waiting for Uncle Barton," Tom said.

"Here, you, Yuke, come an' help me out with the boat!" called out the old fisherman to a stalwart young fellow who was mending a net in front of a cottage near by.

"Yes, father," he answered, and joining the old man and the boys, he went with them to the waterside, where a four-oared fishing-boat was launched.

The boys sat in the middle, and the fisherman and his son occupied the two end seats, plying the oars. They rowed straight toward the Floating School.

The fisherman was old Dan Bronson, and he and his son were now about to carry out the plan of Barton to have the boys kidnapped, and carried on board the bad boys' academy.

"Hello! There's Dr. Bircham's floating school, which we've heard so much about!" cried Tom, as he saw the old vessel in the distance.

"That's so. What a place to shut boys up in, with no place

for a ball game, or any sort of sport that a fellow cares for in summer," replied Frank.

"I should say so. I wonder what the boys have to do there? One thing is certain. They can't get away no matter how badly they are used."

"Maybe you would like to go on board the vessel. This is one of the days they let visitors board her," said old Bronson, covertly winking at his son, who was just as rascally as his sire.

"Let's do it, Tom!" exclaimed Frank.

"I don't know any one who has visited the floating school. It would suit me first rate to find out how they run the queer academy," assented Tom.

And so old Bronson and his son pulled up to the side of the old vessel, and called out to Dr. Bircham, who, with his two tutors, and a couple of employes, were on deck.

"These 'ere young gents, nephews of the Honorable Barton Sax, of Valeville, would like to visit ye, doc!"

"Delighted to welcome the youngs gents to this acqueatic institution of learning and moral suasion," said Dr. Bircham grandiloquently.

The boys responded, and ran up the landing ladder to the deck.

Dr. Bircham shook hands with them, and introduced the two tutors, who with himself composed the "faculty" of the academy.

One of these men was a short, fat, brutal-looking fellow, evidently very fond of a dram; for he disported quite a fine bouquet—of rum blossoms—on his rubicund countenance.

"This is Mr. Moon," said Dr. Bircham, presenting the gentleman of the facial flower-garden.

"And this is Mr. Meter," and the principal of the Floating School, indicating the other tutor, who was a thin little man with very long hair. He wore an old velvet coat and a low collar with a knotted scarf whose ends were loose a la Lord Byron.

"Mr. Moon is teacher of Mathew Maticks, an' Mr. Meter here, he runs the side branches, such as readin', writin', syeppin' an' them. This 'ere is a practical institootion, an' we teach only practical branches of education," continued Dr. Bircham.

The boys acknowledged the introduction, and indicating a jolly-looking Dutchman and a fat darkey, who were busy cleaning up the deck, the "principal" went on to say:

"The Senegambian is Jeff Jandars, our cook. The Dutchman is our factotum. I trust you know the meaning of that Latin term."

Tom and Frank laughed. They were not only amused, but astonished. The ignorance and pretension of the fellow calling himself "Dr. Bircham" was simply ludicrous.

Dr. Bircham frowned, Mr. Moon looked fierce, Mr. Meter said chantingly:

"The foolish boys did laugh in glee,
And loudly toot their glad he! he!"

"Ah! I almost forgot to mention, young gents, that Mr. Meter is a poet—a great genius. That beautiful rhyme which he has just heaved is undoubtedly entirely impromptu."

"Entirely so," replied Mr. Meter, bowing an acknowledgment.

Just at that moment Frank heard the dip of oars, and turning, he saw the old fisherman and his son pulling swiftly away from the floating school.

"The old fellow has gone and left us. What does this mean?" exclaimed the lad.

"Here! Hold on! Come back!" shouted Tom, rushing to the rail.

But the old fisherman and his son did not appear to hear him, and they continued to pull steadily away.

"He has left us here on purpose!" said Tom, with a sudden suspicion that alarmed him in his mind.

"Just so, my young fellers, just so. The fact is, your uncle, Barton Sax, has arranged for you to become members of our

little reformatory institootion, an' paid fer ye in advance," said Dr. Bircham, with a cunning leer.

Mr. Moon laughed, and helped himself to a drink from a pocket flask.

Mr. Meter chanted:

"And now you belong to our floating school,
You'll soon find out we understand home rule."

"This is an outrage!"

"We're caught in a trap!"

The boys uttered the exclamations simultaneously.

"Well, you may as well make the best of it, or I shill hev to introdooce you to the 'persuader.' Mr. Moon, produce the persuader," said Dr. Bircham, with a malicious grin.

Moon picked up a bundle of hickory switches that lay beside the rail.

"Of all the 'cranky,' ignorant, pretentious sets of scoundrels in the world I'll bet a hat this crowd takes the bun," said Frank in an aside to Tom.

"Now then ter give ye a chance ter make up yer minds to take the thing easy, you'll go below deck ter reflect on the vanity o' earthly matters an' the 'vantage o' livin' on the water until evenin' session," said Bircham.

"It's no use of kicking. We are in for it. Uncle Barton has outwitted us. But if we don't get out of this scrape and tally up our end, even with the old rascal, we ought to 'graduate' here," whispered Tom.

So he and Frank made no resistance, but upon being directed so to do followed Bircham below deck. There he locked them up in a cabin. Just after dark Mr. Meter came and conducted the lads on deck again.

There a portable desk for Dr. Bircham was set up, and he was seated at it. Mr. Moon was in a chair at his right hand, and Mr. Meter took a seat on his left.

A dozen half starved looking boys, ranging from ten to seventeen years of age, were drawn up in line before the "principal." Tom and Frank joined the line of students.

Then Bircham picked up a big tin horn, and blew a blast on it.

"Attention! Eyes up. Fustly the readin' of the rules of this aqueatic institootion of learnin' by Mr. Moon," said Bircham, ponderously.

Mr. Moon, with some difficulty, got on his feet, and opening a book tried to read. But the effort was a failure. His pocket flask was empty, but he was not. Mr. Moon sat down and slid from his seat to the floor, and began to snore.

"It's a dark night, but we've got a full moon," said Tom.

The miserable boys tittered at this sally, and Dr. Bircham snatched up his big horn, and blew another blast.

This enjoined silence, and Mr. Meter chanted:

"'Tis sad to see the young
Of older folks make fun."

"What's the matter with the gas meter!" inquired Frank, and that time the students roared.

Dr. Bircham sprang up and blew a terrific blast on the big horn, and then he said:

"Silence! And if the new boys say anything more I'll have 'em birched on the spot."

"Will you, Bircham?" asked Frank, loud enough for his near neighbors to catch the words and have a laugh.

But the doctor didn't hear him, luckily perhaps for the lad.

Then Bircham read the rules of the school aloud, as follows:

"Boys will retire at nine and get up at six. One hour for recreation, which is scrubbin' the deck. Breakfast at seven. Study until twelve. One hour intermission. Study until four. School dismissed until eight. One hour study. Then bed.

"Order of the week—Monday, physic day. Tuesday, bath. Wednesday, drill. Thursday, declamation. Friday, punishments. Saturday, play-day."

Bircham paused in the reading and then said:

"You are now dismissed until the horn blows. There will be no evening study hour; when the horn toots you will go to bed."

The boys scattered at once. Bircham and Meter helped the full Moon to his cabin, and just then a freckled-faced boy who looked as if he enjoyed a joke touched Tom on the shoulder, and said:

"I've got hold of the bottle of awful stuff Bircham makes us take every Monday. What shall I do with it?"

"Heave it overboard," advised Tom.

"No, no," said Frank, picking up the big tin horn. "I'll show you what to do with it."

He had a story paper in his pocket and he wadded it into the big end of the horn for a stopper, and then poured the contents of the bottle in the small end, and set the horn up as he had found it.

Then the three boys watched and waited. Finally Bircham came on deck again, seized the horn and attempted to blow it. But of course the contents of the horn ran down his throat and half strangled him. Then he was mad, indeed, and the way he stamped and roared was a sight to see. The wad of paper came out of the horn, and by the light of the ship's lantern Bircham saw Frank Sax's name on it.

Instantly the old rascal made a rush at Frank and seized him by the collar.

"So you played that trick on me, you young vagabond! I'll warm your jacket. Meter, the 'persuader.' Now, then, off with your coat, my funny youngster!" roared Bircham.

But at that moment the fat darky suddenly darted up the companion stairs, and shouted:

"Fire! Fire! Mr. Moon done drop a lamp in de spirits room an' set de ship on fire!"

"And the only boat that we can keep afloat is at the village being repaired!" cried Meter, in alarmed tones.

The smoke now came pouring up the companion stairs, and a scene of wild confusion ensued.

Frank was released and he and Tom ran to the ship's side and looked out upon the five miles of water between them and the land.

"If the vessel is doomed we are to perish! Oh, what an awful fate!" cried Tom.

CHAPTER IV.

THE FIRE ON BOARD THE FLOATING SCHOOL.

Dr. Bircham's floating school was not very well equipped with appliances for the extinguishing of fire. But there was an abundant supply of water at hand.

The Bad Boys' School had the whole lake to supply the needed water to suppress a conflagration, and the only hose on board and a hand-pump was quickly brought into service, and manned by Jeff Jandars, the darky cook, and Hans Schneider, the Dutchman, whom Dr. Bircham delighted to call his "factotum."

A stream of water was thrown down through a hole in the deck upon the fire in the spirit room; fortunately there were no spirits stored there now, and so the conflagration did not gain headway very rapidly.

"Here, you good-for-nothing young rascals, all hands to the quarter deck, get the pails used in washing down the decks, and form a line to the spirit room!" yelled Bircham, rushing about among the frightened boys, and cuffing them right and left to hasten their movements.

Tom and Frank Sax did not leave their position beside the rail for an instant, and catching sight of them Bircham picked up the bundle of whips, which he suggestively called "the persuader," and came at them saying, threateningly:

"I'll stir you up! Come now, lively, you young varmints, an' join the water line!"

Bircham made several vicious cuts at the two boys with his bundle of switches as he spoke, but they nimbly avoided his blows.

"We may as well do what we can to save the old hulk since it seems our lives depend upon its salvation," said Tom.

Then he and Frank ran forward and joined the line of boys already going to pass water from the ship's side to the fire in the spirit room.

Dr. Bircham never saw the boys of the Floating School commence any task he set them to with as much alacrity as on this occasion.

Every one of the unfortunate lads understood the peril.

All worked as only such an incentive as the preservation of their lives could have caused them to labor.

The battle with the flames did not last long, however; fortune favored the efforts of the boys of the floating school, and the fire was soon extinguished.

It was then ascertained that the old vessel had not been damaged to such an extent as to render it necessary to abandon her.

Indeed, the result of the conflagration was far less serious than might have been anticipated.

The partitions separating the spirit-room from the other compartments below deck were consumed, but aside from that little damage had resulted.

The hull was intact. No danger of a leak was anticipated, and Dr. Bircham and his tutors congratulated themselves.

The excitement of the fire had sobered Mr. Moon up to a certain degree. In truth he was about as sober as he ever became by the time the flames were extinguished.

Then much to the surprise of all Moon vowed that he had not been near the spirit-room that night, and he was exceedingly indignant at hearing Bircham say:

"You are the cause of all this damage, sir. I shall have to deduct the expenses of repairs from your yearly stipend."

"Who says I set the fire? I tell you, I didn't—haven't been out of my own cabin," declared Moon.

"The nigger says you dropped a lamp in the spirit-room," replied Bircham.

"Jeff lies! More likely he dropped the lamp himself."

"'Deed I didn't, sah, an' I'se tellin' de troof. I done seed yer drop that lamp in de spirit-room. Yer had on yer long gray coat," said Jeff Jandars.

"Ha! Is that so? Had on my long gray coat, did I? Well, this beats me. You know, doc, my long gray ulster has been mysteriously missing for four days. I had concluded some of the boys must have spirited it away," said Moon.

"This is queer. Did you see the face of the man who wore Mr. Moon's coat, Jeff?" asked Dr. Bircham.

"No, sah! I only seed his back. Den biff! went de lamp, an' de fire busted right out on de whisky-soaked floor. I didn't stay dar but got on deck and sung out fire as quick as ebber I could."

"This 'ere looks like some sort of mystery. It gets me who dropped the lamp! Not a boy, for Jeff said it was a man. I'm puzzled. But the affair must be 'vestigated," said Bircham.

There was further talk between him and his employes and then the boys were dismissed to bed.

In a compartment of the hold adjoining the side of the saloon, which was fitted up as a school-room with rude, uncomfortable benches, the boys' bunk-room was situated.

The apartment was long and narrow, and the bunks were mere shelves of rough boards built against the sides.

There was a little coarse straw in each bunk, and in some instances a blanket. But many of the boys were compelled to sleep in their clothes on the stow.

A humane man would have provided better quarters for animals. But Dr. Bircham's idea of humanity did not extend to the providing of any comforts for his pupils that entailed expense.

The boys were to be sincerely pitied.

They were the victims of cruelty and injustice from which, in the history of the dreadful prison for boys, with but one exception, no one was ever known to have escaped. And there was a doubt about that one exception.

Tom and Frank were surrounded by the miserable boy prisoners of the floating school, which was to them a veritable hell, as soon as the door of the bunk-room was locked for the night.

Tom heard the key turn in the lock of the only door of the room and he exclaimed:

"What! Do they lock you all in like this every night?"

"Yes," replied the boy whose acquaintance Tom and Frank had made in connection with the trick played upon Bircham through the tin horn.

"Bein' locked in at night isn't nothing compared with the dreadful cruelty and privation we have to put up with at the hands of old Bircham and his tutors," said another bright-looking lad.

"You're right, Jack," assented Dick Smith, the first speaker. "We are starved and beaten, tortured for the least offense, indeed, and do you know I think old Bircham is paid sometimes to cause the death of boys by cruelty."

"Good Heavens! Can that be so? Indeed, I do not think the ignorant old rascal would hesitate at anything for which he was well paid," replied Frank.

"I've been here longer than any other boy," continued the lad called Jack, and whose full name was Jack Decker, "and I know four boys have been killed—murdered by cruelty—since I've been here."

"And hasn't any one ever escaped from the terrible floating prison-school yet?" asked Tom.

"Maybe one boy has, but we are not sure about that," replied Jack Decker. "You see, we had a boy here by the name of Bruce Baldwin, and he was a dandy. The best feller you ever saw. His step-father had sent him here, and I'll bet old Bircham had his orders to see he didn't live long, for he and his two tutors set right in to make it hot for Bruce. He was beaten and starved, until one night he came to my bunk at midnight and told me he had rather die than stand it any longer. He had secured the key to the bunk-room door, and he told me he meant to let himself out and try to swim ashore if he failed to secure the boat Bircham uses. Well, I begged Bruce to tell the people everywhere the truth about this awful place, and send some one to rescue us if he ever got off. He promised me he would do so, and he gave me his hand on it, and said: 'I've got an elder brother who is a rich man, and who lives in a distant city. I mean to go to him if I escape, and if I live I'll surely send some one to help you poor boys. If you don't get help soon, you can conclude that I have gone to the bottom of the lake!' That's just what Bruce said. I remember every word. Well, the next morning Bruce was missed. But the boat was found in its place. It seemed the desperate boy had swam away from the old vessel. Bircham was mad, and he and the tutors took the only boat and rowed ashore. They spent the day on land, making inquiries and searching for Bruce Baldwin. But they didn't find a trace of him, and they decided he must have drowned on the way to the land."

"Some way I've always believed Bruce escaped, and I've got faith to think he'll send some one to save us yet," concluded Jack Decker.

"I hope so; but why do you not think as the authorities of the floating school do?" asked Tom.

"Some time I'll tell you, when I know you better," replied Jack Decker, mysteriously.

The boys talked for a long time, and Tom and Frank heard such terrible stories of the cruelty of Dr. Bircham and his tutors that they shuddered at the prospect ahead of them.

They realized that they were in the power of the most sordid, mercenary and merciless of wretches.

CHAPTER V.

THE MYSTERY OF THE PRISON-HOLE ON THE FLOATING SCHOOL.

Finally the boys of the floating school were startled by a heavy rap on the door of the bunk-room, and the voice of Dr. Bircham reached them as he called out, savagely:

"Silence in there, an' tumble inter yer bunks, every one of ye. If I hear another sound of your talk, I'll have ye all strung up by the thumbs in the morning."

The boys scrambled to obey the order of their cruel tyrant as swiftly as possible. In a moment silence reigned in the bunk-room.

The boys had gained their hard beds, and in their dark, badly ventilated quarters they sought to obtain rest to fortify them for another day of their unhappy life on the floating prison-school.

Tom and Frank crept into the same bunk, and they vainly tried to sleep. The hours passed wearily, but the boys could not find the blessed oblivion of sleep.

Midnight came.

Tom and Frank heard a clock in the saloon chime the hour, and presently they were startled by another sound.

Then they heard a faint, pitiful groan. The sound continued. It seemed muffled and to emanate from some point at a distance. But the boys were sure the groans came from some one who was suffering.

Their hearts were thrilled with the sentiment of pity, and placing their ears to a crack in the partition beside their bunk they listened intently.

"Surely that is a boy's voice," whispered Frank to his brother presently.

"Yes, and perhaps the poor fellow is some victim of Bircham's cruelty," assented Tom.

"I should not wonder. Oh, Tom, I wish you and I could help him. His groans make my heart ache."

"I would like to help the person we hear if he needs assistance, but we can't do so. We are locked in like convicts in a prison."

Just then Tom uttered a half stifled exclamation in startled tones. He had felt a hand upon his arm.

"Hist! It's only me, Jack Decker," said a voice, and the boys knew the lad who had already given them his confidence was beside their bunk.

In a moment they saw that Dick Smith was with Jack.

"You have heard the groaning?" asked the latter.

"Yes. What is the cause of it? Who is suffering?" replied Tom.

"Poor little Ted Lindsley," replied Jack Decker.

"Yes," added Dick Smith, "old Bircham beat the poor little fellow terribly and then put him in the black hole. I expect the old wretch hopes the little fellow will die there."

"And little Ted has been alone in that terrible place for three days now, starving, suffering in the darkness among the rats and vermin," supplemented Jack.

"This is awful! Boys, we must save the victim of Bircham's cruelty. I cannot endure thinking that such awful crimes shall go on here!" said Frank impulsively.

"Yes, yes. But tell us what you mean by the black hole. It's easy enough to say what we must do, Frank, but doing it is another thing," Tom replied.

"That's so. You fellers are the right sort, and Dick and I take to you. We'll tell you all we know about the black hole. It's a square, well-like place in the deepest part of the vessel. The only opening is a trap-door. Boys are lowered down into the terrible place, the door is fastened on them, and they are left to starve and suffer with thirst for as long a time as Bircham sees fit to continue their terrible punishment," said Jack.

"Yes, and boys who have been in the 'black hole,' and come out alive, say that the place is overrun with rats and vermin,

and that it is filthy beyond compare. The air is suffocating and the victim knows no rest," Dick Smith went on to say.

"I'm game to try to rescue little Ted if we can get out of the bunk-room in any way," said Tom.

"That's what we're here for," replied Jack Decker.

"You see, we can't trust all the boys. There are some sneaks. Poor fellers! They seek to gain favor by sycophantic, servile obedience and tale-bearing. Then Bircham would torture the truth out of some of the smaller boys if he suspected they knew anything he wanted to find out," Dick Smith exclaimed.

"The fact is, when Bruce Baldwin left the ship he gave me the key to the bunk-room, and I've kept it ever since, thinking some time to use it to escape myself," said Jack Decker.

"Bravo! You are a trump, and Tom and I are with you to rescue the little boy!" cried Frank.

The conversation was carried on in whispers, and the four boys who were now intent upon rescuing the little victim of Bircham's cruelty did not think that any of their comrades in the bunk-house overheard them.

"Now, boys," continued Jack Decker, "since I've got the key to the door and know the route to the black hole, I'll lead the way."

"All right," assented Tom.

"Now don't make a sound to awaken any of the other boys and forward we go," replied Jack Decker.

He stole toward the door of the bunk-house and the other three boys followed him.

Jack had tried the key he had received from the missing boy whose fate was a mystery in the door before the occasion. He knew it worked easily and noiselessly.

So he had no hesitation about using the key for fear of the sound it might make, and in a moment he had the door open.

Jack led the way to the deck after the two had passed out of the bunk-room.

But the shrewd and thoughtful lad paused long enough to relock the door. He did not mean through any oversight of his it should become known that any one save Bircham had a key to the bunk-room.

The boys upon reaching the deck found it deserted.

Jack laughed under his breath, as he said:

"This is Jeff's night to stand guard, and I counted on finding the darky asleep. See! Yonder he lays at the door of the cook's galley. A shock to wake the seven sleepers wouldn't wake up the darky."

"Jeff is a good feller, and I'm sure he'd help us boys if he dared," said Dick Smith.

"How about the Dutchman whom Dr. Bircham calls his factotum?" asked Tom Sax.

"Oh, I don't know whether he would like to be friendly or not. You see, we have hardly had time to find him out. He is a new hand on the floating prison-school," replied Jack Decker.

"Yes, Bircham hired Hans since Bruce Baldwin, the missing boy, disappeared, and the Dutchman is a puzzle to me. I've seen him looking at the boys with an expression in his eyes that seemed like pity more than once. But when Bircham is around he is rough and harsh with the boys," said Dick Smith.

Jack had led the way to the quarter deck while they were speaking.

But he suddenly halted, uttered a low warning hiss, and crouched down in the dark shadows of a deck cabin.

The other boys followed his example.

With fast-beating hearts they peered through the gloom, and the succeeding moment a dark form glided by them with an object in his arms.

In a moment the form had vanished.

But the boys fancied they had recognized Hans Schneider, though they were not positive.

What the man carried in his arms they were unable to tell. He seemed to pass noiselessly down the companion way.

The boys remained where they were for some moments, and

they listened intently, but they heard no sound from the man who had disappeared.

"We'll go on to the black hole now," whispered Jack, finally.

The four boys then crept stealthily forward, and presently Jack paused before a trap-door in the deck.

"Here we are. This is the door to the terrible well-like place Bircham has made to imprison us boys in as a means of cruel punishment or death," said he.

"Let's get the door open at once. I've got the rope to draw Teddy up with and a bit of candle," said Dick Smith, and he unwound a coil of rope from about his waist, and produced a half-burned sperm candle.

"There isn't a sound from the black hole now," remarked Tom Sax, as the boys stood listening at the trap-door.

"No," assented Jack.

"What can it mean?" wondered Tom.

"Possibly the poor little boy has fainted, or maybe he is dead down there in the darkness," Frank said.

"It is strange that he should have become silent," Jack stated.

Then he and Dick got the door open.

A square black opening was revealed.

"Light the candle and let's see if we can find out what Teddy's condition is," said Jack.

Dick obeyed. The candle blazed, and he held it down over the opening of the black hole. All the lads gathered around him and gazed down into it eagerly.

"The place is empty!" exclaimed Jack, instantly.

It was true. There was no one in the black hole. At that moment the boys heard a heavy step behind them, and turning, they beheld Mr. Moon glaring down upon them.

CHAPTER VI.

A REVOLT OF THE BOYS OF THE FLOATING SCHOOL.

The four boys were for the moment speechless with surprise and alarm.

Moon had stolen upon them so silently that the first intimation they had of his presence was received when he was close upon them.

It was quite evident that Mr. Moon had indulged rather freely since the fire, for he was quite unsteady on his legs and the fumes of alcohol told the cause.

When Moon was partially intoxicated, as he now was, his always evil temper asserted itself most prominently.

His little pig-like, blood-shot eyes flashed with an ugly light as he glared at the boys.

"So, so. I've caught ye at it. Hick! I 'spose yer meant to git the Lindsley brat out, didn't yer? Hick! Now I'll bet yer all git a dose o' the same medicine yerselves. You, Jack Decker, come ter me!" said Moon.

As he spoke, he staggered at Jack.

The boy retreated and said to his companions:

"We're in for a terrible time of it now. I don't know what old Bircham won't do when Moon tells him of this. He'll be sure to say we let little Ted out of the black hole. Shouldn't wonder if he'd half murder us."

"What's that?" demanded Moon, for Jack spoke in a whisper.

Jack did not answer. Tom and Frank Sax exchanged a few words aside.

"If Moon tells on us we are in for it, and as Moon is pretty drunk, what do you say, Tom, if we chuck him in the black hole?" said Frank.

"We might as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb. Moon may not be discovered in the pit for some time. Let's hope we may get away before he's found and push him in now."

"Done!" said Frank decisively in answer to his brother.

Meantime Moon was unsteadily following up Jack and Dick, who were retreating.

Tom signaled to the boys and they returned to the mouth of the pit.

Moon followed them, and he had now worked himself into a reckless fit of drunken rage.

No suspicion of what the daring boys meant to do entered his muddled brain.

He was only intent upon seizing Jack Decker, against whom he seemed to entertain a particular spite.

Jack leaped over the yawning pit.

Moon staggered close to the edge of it in his eager pursuit.

Frank Sax saw that the opportunity he desired had come.

Quick as thought he sprang at the drunken wretch and gave him a violent push.

Moon reeled forward and fell into the black hole.

As he went down he grasped wildly at the sides of the trap.

But he did not succeed in saving himself. He struck the bottom of the pit with a heavy thud.

The boys stood shuddering about the dark opening for a moment.

They listened intently but they heard only a faint groan or so. This assured them that Moon had not broken his neck in his fall and they concluded he was partly stunned, else he would have been certain to make a loud outcry.

Quickly the lads closed the trap.

Silently they stole back toward the bunk-room. And they were sorely perplexed and troubled.

Some one had rescued little Ted, but who?

In whispers they discussed the situation.

They were all inclined to think the man they suspected was Hans the Dutchman, who had passed them on the deck with a burden in his arms.

When Frank and Tom Sax voiced this opinion the other two lads said they thought it might be so.

But Jack Decker added:

"What motive can the Dutchman have in secretly befriending Ted? He would only be risking losing his place by doing so, and, after all, would he be likely to do that?"

The lads reached the bunk-room and let themselves in.

The door was relocked behind them, and once more they sought their hard bunks, but they were too excited to sleep.

They all looked pale and haggard the next morning when the horn sounded to call them to breakfast, which was served at a long table in the saloon, which had been converted into a rude school-room.

And such a breakfast.

It consisted of stale bread and some brackish soup that sickened the Sax brothers at the first taste. But the half-starved boys who had been long at the floating school devoured the small portions measured out to them in dirty tin basins by Bircham and Meter eagerly, and one little fellow, like Oliver Twist, dared to ask for more.

This was regarded by Bircham as a high crime and misdemeanor, and the little boy was promptly condemned to go without dinner and supper.

Bircham and his two tutors always feigned to take their meals with the "pupils."

But in reality they dined in Bircham's cabin alone after the boys were fed. There excellent meals were served by Jeff, who was a splendid cook.

Moon had already been missed by Bircham and Meter, but they thought he was asleep. Finally, when the professor and Meter went to take their "private breakfast" and Moon did not appear at the table, they sent Jeff to call him.

The darky returned and announced that Mr. Moon was not in his cabin and nowhere to be seen.

"I always said he'd fall overboard and drown yet some night when he was drunk," said Meter.

"He may be somewhere on board," replied Bircham, and he and Meter, aided by Jeff and Hans, the Dutchman, set about searching the vessel. Of course Moon was not found, for no one thought of looking for him in the closed black hole and, strange to say, if alive there, Moon made no outcry.

"Well, well, such is life. For once in his life I 'spose Moon is full of water at the bottom of the lake," said Bircham, finally.

Then school was called to order in the saloon, and Bircham announced the fate of Moon.

"Beloved boyees, I hev the painful and mournful duty of tellin' you that our esteemed tutor, Mr. Moon, has gone to that borne from which no return tickets are issued. Some time during the night we suppose he must have walked overboard, and now he rests upon some coral strand with ther sea-weed for his pillar an' the blue waves for his windin' sheet. Excuse my tears. We all mourn. Don't we all mourn?"

Bircham paused and the boys hypocritically took out their handkerchiefs and employed them properly, as Bircham seemed to demand.

He went on at some length to laud the virtues of the lamented Moon, but finally the routine exercises of the mock school were begun as usual.

When the time for intermission came, Frank Sax picked up a letter on the floor which he had seen Bircham drop.

One glance at the address on the envelope told Frank that it was written by his rascally uncle, Barton Sax.

"See here, Tom," said Frank. "Here's a letter Bircham lost. It's from Uncle Barton, and I'm bound to find out its contents."

"Yes. Let's read it!" replied Tom, with eager curiosity.

Frank took the letter from the envelope, and the two lads read as follows:

"DEAR BIRCHAM:—Your note at hand. I congratulate you upon the method you have originated for the final disposal of pupils whose friends or guardians decide they would be better off in another world. I agree to your terms. Make sure that the boys, Tom and Frank Sax, shall never leave the floating ship alive, and the money is yours.

"Signed,

B. S."

"This is terrible! Why, Tom, our uncle actually engages Bircham to murder us. We must escape. Better to drown in the lake than die a lingering death of starvation and cruelty!" cried Frank.

"Yes—yes. But I would not have believed such a dreadful thing of Uncle Barton had we not the evidence of this letter in his writing to prove it. It seems he is a most mercenary and wicked man," replied Tom.

"Who would believe us, if we were to return to Valeville, and tell of our uncle's dreadful plot to get us out of the way?" his brother asked.

"No one. That is to say, without we could furnish proof that could not be doubted by the most skeptical."

"Then we must keep this letter. Some day it may serve to prove our uncle's villainy."

"Yes. Conceal it on your person, Frank. It's the best evidence of Barton Sax's guilt we could have."

Just then Mr. Meter entered the saloon. He and Bircham had gone out during the intermission. Mr. Meter blew the tin horn to call the school to order, and a moment later the four boys who had been out of the bunk-room secretly the preceding night beheld a sight that caused their hearts to stand still.

Professor Bircham and Mr. Moon entered.

"There they are! Jack Decker, Dick Smith, and the two Sax boys are the rascals who let Ted Lindsley out of the black hole last night and shut me up in it," roared Moon, in savage tones, indicating the four boys as he named them, by pointing.

"Heavens!" whispered Frank Sax to his brother. "Now Bircham will have an excuse for inflicting some cruel punishment upon us."

"Decker and Smith, I'll consider your cases later. Of the new boys who have incited this mutiny an' insubordination I'll make an immediate example. Frank an' Tom Sax, you

will each get a hundred lashes and a week in the black hole on a diet of water."

"Never!" shouted Frank, springing to his feet. "Boys, these villains cannot whip us all. I'll lead you. We can seize the ship if you all pitch in and help."

"Hurrah! Hurrah! Down with old Bircham!" shouted Jack Decker and Dick Smith. The other boys took up the cry and the school-room instantly became a scene of confusion.

It seemed the maltreated, persecuted boys only wanted a leader to cause them to turn upon their cruel master.

CHAPTER VII.

THE BATTLE IN THE SCHOOL ROOM.

Dr. Bircham, the tyrant of the floating school, was simply astounded at the revolt of the boys.

Never before since he established the dreadful prison academy on the old vessel had such a thing taken place.

The villainous old fellow had supposed that he had so completely crushed out all the spirit and manliness of his victims that such a thing as a united rebellion was impossible.

Mr. Moon and Mr. Meter were as completely surprised as the principal of the school on the lake.

For a moment therefore the trio composing the faculty of the academy stood dumfounded.

All the advantage of surprise was on the side of the boys, and led by Tom and Frank Sax, the now really desperate lads were not slow to take advantage of the circumstances.

The Sax brothers foresaw that a tremendous outburst of rage and a combined rush upon themselves and their companions would ensue upon the moment when Bircham and his villainous tutors regained their presence of mind.

The two lads were developing into tacticians and they comprehended that their greatest danger lay in the chance of being overwhelmed and routed by the first enraged onset of their brutal task-masters.

"Quick, boys, a barricade!" said Tom, in low, intense tones to his nearest comrades.

The lads caught the idea and immediately desks and benches were overturned pell-mell and tumbled together in a heap across the saloon.

It was scarcely the work of a moment for the many willing and eager hands engaged in the task to raise the improvised barrier.

Swelling with rage and so red in the face that he was almost purple, Bircham finally found voice to roar:

"Mutiny! Mutiny! Mutiny on my school-ship! You young scoundrels. I'll have you all rope-ended within an inch of your lives! Back with them 'ere benches an' desks in place! Back with 'em, I say, and be quick about it!"

"Rats!" yelled Dick Smith, delighted at Bircham's discomfiture and the partial realization at least of dreams of revolt which he had indulged in for many a long week.

"You're counting your chickens before they are hatched. Please don't punish us—until you catch us," retorted Frank Sax, derisively.

"That's the talk. We might just as well sass the old bloat right up to his teeth. We may as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb, you know, fellers," added Tom.

"And I've kept my indignation bottled up so long, it's a relief to let out on the old rascal!" cried Dick Smith.

"Come, come! I'll give you one more chance. Set the school-room in order and resume your seats. I see who the ring-leaders of this 'ere mutiny are. I'll punish them so they will never lead another outbreak in this 'ere aquatic institution of learnin'. The rest on ye I'll go light on if ye humbly beg pardon," continued Bircham.

This was somewhat of a decadence from the first order he had issued.

The fact of the matter was, Bircham began to realize that he had some determined spirits to deal with and that the revolt of his victims was a more serious matter than he at the outset comprehended.

"Save yerselves from the worst punishment ye kin git. Surrender while you can, you young rascallions," advised Mr. Moon in a husky voice.

"Yes," drawled Mr. Meter; "our worthy principal is willing to temper mercy with justice, even arter this. His forgivin' spirit are an' ever shall be a subject of admiration. Ah me—ah me! The cussedness of boyhood's a trial an' a tribulation to the flesh!"

"Hear! hear! More! more!" yelled the boys, derisively, as Mr. Meter paused.

"Somebody wind him up again; he's run down!" piped Dick Smith, shrilly.

There was a laugh at Mr. Meter's expense, which became a roar as Frank Sax suggested that the atmosphere be allowed to penetrate his whiskers.

Such a hearty laugh of real genuine boyish mirth had not been heard on board the floating school in many a long day.

"That's right! I'll bet you don't feel as much like whipped curs as you did half an hour ago. Keep up your spirits. Never say die, and we'll come out all O. K. yet," cried Tom.

But now Bircham could control his anger no longer, and with a bellow such as might have been uttered by a mad bull, he rushed forward at the barricade of desks and benches, brandishing the bunch of hickory whips which he facetiously called "the persuaders."

"Come on, tutors! Come on, and we'll learn the young scamps a lesson. Come on, and we'll thrash the hides offen every mother's son of 'em!" Bircham roared.

Mr. Moon caught up a heavy ruler and Mr. Meter grasped a broken stool.

The three men advanced upon the barricade the boys had formed, with determined mien.

But the young revolutionists stood firm behind the benches and desks, and they were in readiness to give their tyrant masters a reception that would be warm, though not by any means friendly.

In a moment books, slates, rulers and all sorts of missiles that chanced to come to hand, were flying through the air at the heads of Bircham and the tutors.

The boys discharged a perfect fusillade of miscellaneous articles, such as are found in a school-room.

A slate struck Dr. Bircham squarely on his big rubicund nose and started the "claret." The force of the blow staggered the scheming rascal, and he beat a retreat holding on to his nose with both hands as if he was afraid it might get away from him.

"Oh! Ough! Ough! I am 'sassinated by one of ther pirates. I'll have ye all 'rested fer salt an' battery. Ough! Ough!" cried Bircham, in rage and pain.

Old Bircham had the fighting spirit pretty well knocked out of him just then.

The boys yelled and shouted in delight, and it was but natural that they should enjoy seeing some punishment meted out to the cruel tyrant who had caused so many of them to suffer undeservedly.

A shower of books and slates struck Moon and Meter, and thoroughly pelted, they were soon compelled to follow Bircham in his inglorious retreat.

"Hurrah! Hurrah! The victory is ours!" shouted Frank Sax.

The boys took up the shout and their glad voices made the old ship ring.

By common consent Frank and Tom Sax were accepted as the leaders of the revolt, and feeling that the responsibility rested on them, the brothers did not mean to lose a chance to score a point against old Bircham.

Followed by a shower of missiles, the tutors and Bircham retreated through the door of the saloon.

"Forward!" shouted Frank Sax then, and he bounded over the barricade of desks, and rushed for the door, followed by his brother Tom and a number of the other lads.

Frank closed the door, which opened inward, and drew a bolt, thus securing it.

Just then Bircham was heard shouting:

"Hans! Jeff! This way! Quick! Quick!"

"He's calling the Dutchman and the darky to his assistance!" exclaimed Dick Smith.

"They'll likely try to break down the door," cried Tom.

"We must not let them do that. Reinforced by the Dutchman and the darky, they might get the best of us. It's our best plan to bar them out," advised Frank.

He set the example, and he and his comrades dragged the desks and benches against the door, which was the only way of entrance to the saloon.

"There! I think they'll have a good time opening the door now," said Frank, as the barricading of the door was completed.

As he spoke there came a shower of blows upon the door, and Bircham was heard to say:

"That's right. Beat the door down. Smash it in pieces, but what we get in, Jeff!"

"Yes, sah. Jiss so, sah. I'se doin' de bes' I know to make kindlin' wood out ob de do', sah. But de wood am oak, an' it's mos' as hard as a darky's skull, sah!" Jeff was heard to reply.

"Here! Here! I've got it! The oak plank in the gang-way will serve as a battering ram. We can all take hold and rush it against the door," Moon was heard to suggest.

"Bravo! The very thing! Come, we'll bring the plank!" shouted Bircham.

"Great Scott, fellers, they'll have the door down in spite of all we can do, I'm afraid!" said Frank.

"Yes. It's too bad. I say, it's neck or nothing this time. I won't fall into Bircham's clutches for one. I'll drown in the lake first. I can squeeze through one of the little saloon windows, and drop into the water," Tom cried, in desperation.

"Hello, fellers! Look here, I've made a find!" shouted Jack Decker, Dick Smith's "chum," at that moment.

The boys turned and saw that Jack had opened the door of a small closet which Bircham always kept locked.

"I found the key on the floor. Bircham dropped it when he made his masterly retreat," added Jack.

The boys all crowded to the door of the closet.

Jack brought out a great can of ground red pepper as fine as snuff, and a big bellows "applicator" for blowing insect powder with.

Bircham had used the applicator and the red pepper for destroying insects on board the floating school.

"I've got an idea. We'll turn that bellows arrangement against the worst kind of vermin. Let's charge it. The nozzle is as thin as a lead pencil. It will go through a small hole!" cried Frank.

"Good enough. Old Bircham said we'd 'salted and buttered' him, now let's finish up by peppering him," said Tom.

"Correct. My plan exactly," Frank replied, as he loaded up the applicator with a pint of the fiery red pepper.

Then he went to the door, removed a desk or so, and thrust the nozzle of the instrument through the key-hole.

He had not long to wait before Bircham and the others rushed the oak plank at the door.

"Let her go, Gallagher!" then cried Tom.

banged the plank against the saloon door, the lad worked the bellows.

The result was all that could be desired.

"The "applicator" proved to be an excellent instrument of the kind.

The red pepper was blown in a smarting, burning dust right in the faces of Bircham and the two tutors who chanced to hold the end of the plank which was brought against the door.

The atmosphere outside the closed door was filled with the pepper dust, and it got into the eyes, nose and lungs of the men there.

The plank was dropped instantly, and a chorus of cries and bad words came from the lips of Bircham and the two tutors, while the darky cook jumped about like a jumping-jack as he roared:

"I'se done got blinded! Who frowed dat pepper? Whar's de lake? I'se done took fire, an' I'se gwine to put myself out."

The darky was heard beating a hasty retreat followed by the others.

The Dutchman had not responded to Bircham's call for assistance, and so he was not present at the pepper seance.

"Thunder and Mars! I'm blinded! The young pirates have got into the closet. We're balked again!" cried Bircham.

Mr. Moon used many words to express his wrath and misery which were not recorded in the dictionary.

Mr. Meter made for the deck and some cold water as fast as his legs could carry him.

The others followed, and if the boys could have seen them as they strove frantically to wash the pepper out of their eyes they would have enjoyed the scene hugely.

But Bircham was now really murderous in his rage, and he made all manner of blood-curdling threats as to what he would yet do to punish the insurgents.

Of course he was particularly vindictive against Frank and Tom Sax.

While he washed the pepper out of his eyes, assisted by Hans, the Dutchman, he sputtered out at a great rate.

Hans seemed to sympathize with Bircham.

"I vos sorry mit you. Here, some off dot oil will take dot smart oud mit your eyes," said he, extending a dish.

Bircham plunged his hand into it and slapped the oily substance into his eyes.

"Oxcuse me! I vos make a mistake und got de wrong dish. Dot vos soft soap!" cried Hans just too late, as Bircham uttered a yell.

"Kill that blundering idiot for me, Moon. Throw him overboard, Mr. Meter!" roared Bircham, and he charged at Hans and hurled the soap dish at his head.

But the Dutchman dodged into the cook's galley and escaped. The darky laughed silently and so did Hans.

The tutors and Bircham were too much blinded to witness their mirth.

"Now then, I shall adopt severe measures. No more trifling for Dr. Bircham, principal of the celebrated aquatic institution o' education," said the aged fraud, swelling with self-importance when he finally succeeded in washing the pepper out of his eyes.

"What do you mean to do?" asked Moon.

"I shall give 'em enough o' that saloon school-room. The young villains have locked us out. Very good. I'll make no more attempts on the door. I've thought of a trick worth two of that," replied Bircham.

"What's that?" asked Meter.

"I'll lock them in."

"Bravo, Bravissimo! What a head! What a head you have on your shoulders, my worthy principal. Ah, Ah! That will be to turn the tables on the young pirates famously," cried Meter.

A few moments later Bircham descended to the passage before the door of the saloon.

CHAPTER VIII.

BIRCHAM TURNS THE TABLES ON THE BOYS.

Frank needed not his brother's admonition. He did "let her go." As the principal of the floating school and his associates

But he thought of the pepper and he kept at a safe distance while he shouted:

"I'll fix ye. I'll starve ye out. You like yer quarters so well I'll keep ye shut up there until ye beg to get out. I'll make the school-room a prison for ye. You thought to beat Dr. Bircham, did ye? Well, you'll find out it ain't to be did. Not much. Not while he's got his right senses."

The boys looked at each other blankly as they heard this.

They knew Bircham was quite capable of carrying out his threat to the letter.

There were heavy iron bolts on the outside as well as the inside of the door.

As the last words were spoken by Bircham, he stealthily glided forward and drew these bolts.

Frank Sax heard him as he drew the last bolt to its place, and the lad quickly blew a cloud of pepper dust through the key-hole. But Bircham had his eyes closed, and so he escaped unscathed that time.

"We are in a fix now sure enough," said Frank.

"That's so. There isn't a scrap of food or a drop of water in the school-room," replied Tom.

"Don't let the want of water trouble you. I'll show you how to get all you want of that," cried Dick Smith.

He proceeded to tie a strong cord, which he had in his pocket, to an empty water bucket that was kept in the school-room. One of the little port windows was then opened, and Dick dropped the bucket through it into the lake and drew it up filled with water.

"Good for you, Dick. The water problem is settled. But how about food? My courage is pretty good, but I don't know how long it will last without anything to eat," said Jack Decker.

"It's rather a tough outlook. I wonder how things will turn out? We can go without food for a while anyway. There's a desperate chance left yet if the worst comes. But I won't say anything about that now," replied Frank.

The boys sat down in groups and conversed about the strange situation in which they found themselves placed.

The hours wore on. Night came, and finally all the lads went to bed save Tom and Frank, who volunteered to stand guard, lest the enemy might attempt a surprise while they slept.

But the night passed uneventfully.

The boys were not disturbed.

It seemed that Bircham really meant to keep the boys imprisoned in the saloon until they were starved into submission.

The lads were pretty hungry that morning.

Even the miserable, scanty allowance which Bircham was wont to dole out to them in the way of food would have been welcome then.

But still they showed no signs of weakening in their defiance of the cruel tyrant. Frank and Tom talked hopefully. A little more so than they really felt, truth to say, for they wished to encourage their younger comrades.

They knew that there was danger of a disaffection of the small boys.

Toward noon Bircham again came near the saloon door, and made a bid for the surrender of the insurgents on new terms.

"At the request of my esteemed tutors, Messrs. Moon and Meter, I will promise to pardon you all except Frank and Tom Sax, if you will surrender!"

"No! No! No!" came the answer, in a determined chorus from several throats.

"I'll give you an hour to think the matter over, and then I'll come back again," replied Bircham, and he withdrew at once.

Presently Jack Decker came up to Frank and Tom, and said:

"I'm afraid there's trouble brewing in our ranks."

"How so?" asked Frank.

"Haven't you noticed that big, burly boy yonder going about talking in whispers among the smaller lads?"

"No," replied Frank.

"Well, he's Bill Keen, and he's puttin' the little chaps up to surrender."

"The coward!" exclaimed Frank.

Neither Frank nor Tom were as yet very well acquainted with the boys of the floating school except in the case of Dick Smith and his chum, Jack Decker.

The brothers had not heard much about Bill Keen, but they had observed that Bill Keen assumed a bullying, swaggering manner toward the other lads.

"Yes, Bill Keen is a coward sure enough," said Jack Decker.

"And a tell-tale, too," said Dick Smith.

"He has often tried to curry favor with Bircham by tale-bearing," added Jack.

"Well, I'm a-going to give him a piece of my mind, big bully though he is. You say he is putting the small boys up to surrendering. Did you overhear anything he said?" asked Frank.

"Yes; he said he'd make terms with Bircham and get all who backed him off scot free of punishment," replied Jack.

"That's enough. I'll stop that coward's plan," said Frank.

"Look out, Frank, he's a fighter," admonished Jack.

"So am I when I'm in the right," was the answer, and Frank marched across the school-room to where Bill Keen stood.

"I understand you are advising the boys to give up to Bircham," said Frank, quietly.

"You're a liar!" the school bully blurted out, fiercely.

CHAPTER IX.

THE BULLY OF THE SCHOOL—FRANK IN THE HOLD.

Frank did not anticipate such an abrupt insulting rejoinder. The rebuff came suddenly, but it was resented just as abruptly.

Frank was pretty quick tempered, like most spirited boys, and his reply to the school bully was a knock-down.

Bill Keen measured his length on the floor before he had time to utter any additional insulting remarks.

But he scrambled up at once and threw off his coat.

As he assumed a fighting attitude he cried:

"You took me off my guard. Now you've got to stand up and fight me fair and square. I'll show you you can't knock me down again. I mean to thrash you."

Frank was not a fighting character. He knew that it was not the mark of a gentleman in man or boy to engage in broils. If he had stopped to think he might not have struck the bully so quickly in the first instance. But having done so, he felt that he could not now honorably back out of the contest or refuse to accept Bill Keen's challenge.

Bill Keen weighed more than Frank, and if one judged by size alone he might have decided that Frank was likely to be worsted in the impending battle.

But a keen observer would have seen that Frank was very muscular, and evidently more active than the bully.

"I'm not suffering for a fight. I think I could live right along and enjoy pretty good health if I didn't have a row all summer. But I won't refuse to accommodate you, since you insist," said Frank, quietly, regaining control of his temper, and trying to be cool.

As he spoke he buttoned up his coat.

"Why don't you strip. He's a tough one," said Jack Decker.

"I never take off my coat when I have an easy job on hand," replied Frank.

He knew that other things being anywhere near equal, the advantage is generally with the cool man in a fistic encounter, and his tactics were to make Bill King as angry as possible.

The implied taunt served its intended purpose most excellently.

Bill Keen became more enraged than ever, and still smart-

ing from Frank's blow he rushed at him with his hands up as a "guard" in real boxing style. Frank watched his opponent's eyes as he put up his own hands and met the bully's attack.

Both boys knew something about boxing, but Frank parried the blows the bully aimed at him during his first rush skillfully.

Keen did not touch his opponent.

Frank acted wholly on the defensive. It soon became evident, however, that he was more than a match for the bully of the floating school.

The boys all saw that and a majority of them were well pleased at the discovery. As is usually the case with fellows of his character, Bill Keen had few real friends among the boys.

"You see you can't hit me. Now if you are satisfied we'll quit. If not you'll force me to knock you down again," said Frank.

Bill Keen hesitated for a moment. If he had been alone with his opponent he would probably have drawn out of the fight. But he heard some of the boys sneering at him and the thought of losing prestige with them maddened him and made him reckless of consequences.

So he made another rush to force the fighting for his reply to Frank's reasonable proposition.

Then he found out his mistake very quickly. There was a rapid exchange of blows, and Frank dropped him again.

Just at that juncture the voice of Bircham, who had shortened the time he had proposed to give the boys to reach a final decision, was heard outside the saloon door.

Bill Keen scrambled up, and ran to the door.

"If you please, sir, we ain't all turned against you. Me an' some more are willing to obey orders, only them Sax boys have got a crowd against us!" shouted Bill.

"Throw him overboard!"

"Coward!"

"Put him out!"

Those and other indignant shouts went up from the boys. Even the smallest boys whom probably the bully had in a few instances intimidated into promising to stand by him did not do so.

He had been deposed from the pedestal he had occupied in the imagination of the little fellows as the bully of the school.

He had lost the prestige which gave him influence over his younger school-mates.

What further Bill Keen might have intended to say to Bircham at that time cannot be known.

Almost the ensuing moment he was seized by many willing hands, and despite all his efforts at resistance he was carried across the saloon and thrust into the closet where the applicator and the red pepper had been found.

The key was turned on the bully and he was left to himself a prisoner in the dark little room.

As the door closed upon him, he blurted out in ugly tones:

"I'll get even with you all for this, and with Frank Sax in particular.

Again Bircham offered to let the other boys off if they would surrender and give him a chance to inflict upon Frank and Tom the cruel punishment he had decreed for them.

But the lads firmly refused.

Just before he came down to the door of the saloon, Bircham had missed the terribly significant note signed "B. S." which was now in the possession of the Sax brothers.

Bircham thought he had lost the note in the school-room, and he feared the boys whom he meant should become his victims had found it.

The matter troubled the old rascal. He foresaw that if by any chance the Sax brothers escaped with that note, they could use it as evidence against himself and Barton Sax.

As he went away from the door of the saloon for the last time Bircham muttered:

"I may have dropped it in the black hole after all, when I released Moon."

Bircham had accidentally discovered Moon's plight. The old villain was worried somewhat about the mysterious disappearance of little Ted Lindsley.

He had gone to take a final look into the black hole when he saw Moon, and hauled him out by means of a rope, assisted by Hans and Jeff.

Bircham now went to look for the lost note in the black hole.

Meantime the boys held a consultation.

They were beginning to get terribly hungry and the situation was becoming more and more desperate for them now with the lapse of each hour.

If they could have forced the saloon door they were almost ready to take the desperate chance of making a charge to the deck and fighting to the bitter end for the possession of the ship.

Night came at last and Frank and Tom as well as the other boys saw that something must be done.

All along Frank had a certain desperate expedient in mind.

He had reserved it for the time of critical import which had now arrived.

"We've most of us got jack-knives, I suppose," said Frank.

There was an assent from a number of the boys.

"Well then, here's my plan. We'll cut through the floor. The hold is under us. We can perhaps reach it. If so, we'll get all the food supplies and then draw lots to see which of our number undertakes to escape in the boat which will only carry eight," continued Frank.

The boys knew the ship's boat had been brought home repaired.

The boys sized up the hope held out by Frank's proposition eagerly, and in a few moments the now half-starved lads set to work with a will to cut a hole through the floor.

It was in favor of the desperate project that the floor was of pine wood. The sharp pocket-knives of the boys cut it quite readily.

But as the attempt to reach the hold and the food supplies known to be stored there was not to be made until a later hour, the boys worked leisurely.

By midnight a square hole had been made in the floor large enough to allow one boy to pass through it at a time. It was then unanimously voted that the Sax brothers and Dick Smith and Jack Decker, all of whom volunteered to go, should act as a committee to go in quest of supplies.

Frank was the first one to work himself through the hole.

But scarcely had he dropped down out of sight through it when his young comrades heard a startled cry from his lips.

At that moment Frank had been clutched by a pair of powerful hands in the darkness.

CHAPTER X.

THE BOYS SECURE SUPPLIES—A MESSAGE FROM BRUCE BALDWIN.

There was a moment of breathless suspense for the boys in the saloon school-room.

Frank Sax's startled cry, at the time when he felt himself seized by a pair of strong hands in the gloom just as he had descended through the hole the lads had cut, caused his young comrades to fear some calamity had befallen him.

Tom was almost in the act of dropping through the aperture in the floor, after his brother, when the latter's startled, alarmed utterance was heard.

"Hark! What shall we do, fellers, if Frank has been pounced upon? His discovery means the defeat of our plans to obtain supplies," said Tom.

As he spoke, and before any of the boys could make reply, Frank's voice was again heard.

"Quick, boys! I've got him and I don't mean to let him give an alarm!" Frank said.

Tom did not wait an instant after that. His brother's words coupled with the sounds that told a struggle was in progress, which were now heard, made Tom conclude help was solely needed by Frank.

As Tom dropped upon the floor of the hold a thrilling sight met his eyes; the gloom was suddenly dispelled as if by magic, and the lad beheld Frank and Mr. Moon struggling desperately.

Moon had clutched Frank before the latter was aware of the tutor's presence. The fact was Frank had dropped down right before Mr. Moon as that worthy was on his way to the spirits-room.

The tutor was considerably intoxicated, and so it was not very difficult for Frank to hold his own with him, and that he did.

At the outset Mr. Moon might have shouted an alarm, but he did not do so. Probably he was too much muddled mentally to think what he should do.

Frank realized, of course, that it was all important to prevent his antagonist's sounding an alarm, and so, as soon as possible, he clutched him by the throat.

But whence came the light? What was the source of that sudden and brilliant illumination?

The light came in a diverging halo from over a hogshead at a distance of a few feet. Tom thought it must emanate from a dark lantern, but he could see no one.

Without pausing either to consider or investigate this mystery, Tom hastened to the assistance of his brother. He threw himself upon Moon, and a moment subsequently Dick Smith and Jack Decker dropped down beside the contestants.

The four boys overpowered Moon and bound his hands behind his back by means of some bits of rope which they had found conveniently at hand.

But first they managed to gag the drunken tutor, employing a twisted handkerchief for that purpose, just as Frank had once read of in a story.

As soon as Moon was helpless the boys thought of the light.

But the mystery of its appearance was revealed almost at once. The lads saw a slender little form glide from behind the hogshead with a dark lantern in his hand.

"Little Ted Lindsley!" exclaimed Jack Decker.

Dick Smith also recognized the little apparition at a glance.

Yes, there was the little lad who had been mysteriously rescued from the black hole.

"Well, of all wonder! Where did you come from, Teddy?" asked Jack Decker in tones of amazement.

"Yes, who let you out of the black hole? Tell us all about it?" cried Dick Smith.

"I don't know who let me out of that awful place. I must have been in a faint when some one came and got me out. Oh, it was horrible! horrible!"

The little fellow shuddered and trembled in every limb at the mere recollection of his terrible experience in Bircham's dreadful torture-prison.

Where did you get that dark lantern—for all the world like a burglar's—and where have you been since you were helped out of the black hole?" asked Frank.

"When I came to my senses, after I fainted in that terrible place, I was back yonder, among the empty boxes, hidden in a corner. This lantern giving a faint light, through a crack in the slide, stood beside me, and near it there were a lot of good things to eat, and a jug of water, and oh, yes, there was something more," replied the little boy, beginning to fumble in his pocket.

"What is it?" asked Frank, with eager curiosity.

"This," replied little Ted.

He had flashed a card out of the depths of his pocket at last and he handed it to Frank.

"Hello! What's this?" exclaimed the latter, and he read from the card the name, "Bruce Baldwin."

"Bruce Baldwin! Bruce Baldwin!" chorused Jack and Dick. "That's the name of the boy we were telling you about

who escaped from the floating school and tried to swim to shore," added Jack.

"And what's this? Why, boys, here is a bit of great news. Just listen to this?" cried Frank the next instant, as he reversed the card and scanned some pencil lines which he found written there.

While the boys became silent Frank hastened to read aloud what was written on the back of the card:

"Bruce Baldwin keeps his promise. There is a friend at hand to help you and all the other victims of Bircham's brutality. Remain where you are; I'll care for you. The other boys will find in me a secret helper, and the floating school will, if all goes well, soon be a thing of the past."

There was no signature to the note.

The boys expressed their joy and amazement, and then as he scanned the note, Jack Decker said:

"That's not Bruce Baldwin's writing. He can't be here to help us. Can he, lads?"

"No, I think not. But there is some one on board the floating school whom Bruce Baldwin has sent to help us," replied Frank.

He and Tom exchanged meaning glances as he spoke, and both were thinking of the form they had seen gliding away from the dark hole.

The boys conversed for a few moments more.

"Here we have Moon on our hands; we can't expect to use the hole we cut in the floor again on his account. As soon as he can he will be sure to give information about it. The best thing we can do is to get all the provisions we shall need for a siege up into the school-room now," said Frank finally.

"That's so; and since Moon has seen Ted and will betray the secret of his hiding here in the hold, I think the only thing the little fellow can do is to go up into the school-room and take his chances with the rest of us," replied Tom.

"That's true. What do you say, Ted?" asked Jack Decker.

"Yes, I'll go up into the school-room," assented Ted.

Meantime Dick Sweet, under the hole in the floor, had explained the situation to his comrades in the saloon school-room.

When Moon was bound and gagged, the boys had at once dragged him back among the boxes and barrels at some distance, and so they did not think it possible that he could have overheard their talk—particularly not the latter portion of their dialogue, which had been carried on in low tones.

Frank and Tom each gave little Ted a hand, and thus he was assisted up into the school-room through the hole in the floor.

After a moment the "supply committee" concluded to call down two more boys. This was done. Then a coil of rope and a large basket was found. By means of this the boys proposed to raise the supplies up into the school-room.

They knew the way to the store-room, and they soon reached it and got the door opened. There was a good stock of canned goods, including meat, as well as vegetables, in the room, and there were several barrels of crackers and two whole cheeses.

"We're all right if we can get this grub all up into the school-room. There's enough to start a small grocery store. You bet old Bircham knows how to live well himself if he does starve us. Only let us get the supplies all right, and we'll fight it out on this line if it takes all summer," said Jack Decker hopefully, as he feasted his eyes on the contents of the store-room.

The dark lantern Bruce Baldwin's secret agent had left with little Ted now served the boys for a light, and while they were not slow about satisfying their hunger, they worked while they ate.

And so it did not take more than an hour for them to get most of the provisions from the store-room up into the room above.

But meantime something was taking place in the school-room, which would have occasioned our young heroes great alarm had they known of it.

The fact was, Bill Keen, the traitor, was trying to escape. And he meant to betray his comrades.

The school bully was a cunning rascal, and from the moment when he was first thrust into the closet of the school-room he had no intention of remaining there long. He had a bunch of keys in his pocket, and while the boys were all busy about the reception and storing away of the supplies and no one thought about him, Bill Keen set about trying his keys in the lock of the door.

Fortune favored the rascally lad.

One of his keys chanced to fit the lock.

He opened the door, and crept stealthily out.

No one saw him, and moving noiselessly he made the transit of the saloon and reached one of the small front windows.

Bill Keen opened the window, and climbing upon a desk, squeezed himself through the window, and dropped down into the water. He could swim like a duck, and in a moment or so he had gained the bow and was climbing up by means of the rusty old anchor-chains that had been allowed to remain there.

Bill Keen reached the deck.

It was deserted, and he crossed the companion-way and went down it on his way to Bircham's cabin, saying to himself exultantly:

"I'll warn Bircham of what's going on, and I'll bet he surprises and captures the Sax brothers in the hold."

CHAPTER XI.

FRANK IN BIRCHAM'S CLUTCHES.

Bill Keen went silently down the companion-way, and reached the door of Dr. Bircham's cabin without encountering any one.

A faint ray of light came from under the door of the school tyrant's private quarters. Since the boys revolted Bircham was too much troubled to sleep. Late as was the hour, he lay upon his couch, wide awake, fully dressed, and ready to rush forth upon the instant, in case of an alarm from the watch he had set about the vessel.

Bill Keen tapped upon the cabin door.

At the first sound Bircham was on his feet, and reaching the cabin door, he threw it open.

At the sight of the school bully Bircham uttered an exclamation of mingled surprise and anger. Then he seized the treacherous lad and dragged him into the cabin.

"How did you get out? Who opened the door for ye? Are the rest of the young rascals out?" cried the excited old fellow, shaking Bill until the latter's teeth chattered.

"Let up, will you? This is a nice way to treat me when I just come to tell you what's goin' on, and how you can git hold of them Sax boys!" whimpered Bill.

"Eh, what? Do you mean it, William?" replied Bircham, letting go of the lad.

"Yes, sir. Yes, I do just mean it. They are out, Frank and Tom Sax are, and the boys have cut a hole through the floor of the saloon, and they're carrying all the stuff from the store-room up into the school-room through the hole."

Bill blurted out the news all in a breath, and Bircham did not wait to hear further particulars.

"I left Moon and Meter on the watch in the lower part of the vessel, and I ordered Jeff and the Dutchman to guard the deck. I'll call them to account for neglect of duty, I promise ye!" cried the school tyrant.

He darted out of the cabin as he spoke, and sprang to the

passage leading to the door of the saloon. There he expected to find Mr. Meter and Mr. Moon.

Bircham had not taken many steps when he stumbled upon Meter, who was lying on the floor sound asleep.

Without noise Bircham aroused him and informed him in a whisper of the news Bill Keen had brought.

"Where's Moon? What we must do now is to capture the lads in the hold. I'll bring Jeff and the Dutchman from the deck," added Bircham.

"I don't know what has become of Moon. It seems to me he was here a moment ago, when I dozed. Maybe he has gone to fill his bottle in the spirit-room," replied Meter.

As Bill Keen did not hear Dick Smith explain the situation of affairs in the hold to his comrades, the young rascal had no knowledge of the fact that Moon had been made a captive.

But Bill knew Teddy Lindsley was with the rebels in the school-room, and he would have imparted that surprising news to Bircham if the old fellow had given him time to do so.

Bircham left Meter while the latter was speaking and hastened to the deck. There he saw the Dutchman at the door of the cook's galley.

The "factotum" had a small basket in his hand, and it seemed he was just going out of the cook's galley. Evidently, too, he did not wish Bircham to see the basket, for he dropped it the instant he caught a glimpse of the doctor.

"Where's Jeff? I want you both. I've just found out the young pirates in the school-room have cut through to the hold, and are raiding the store-room. I'll catch some of them at it I expect," said Bircham, hastily.

"Here I is, sah," replied Jeff, coming out of the galley. "Jist come in yere ter git a drink. Me an' Schneider have been watchin' out mighty careful all night so far, sah."

"Well, come along! We'll steal to the store-room and nab some of the young pirates if we can catch 'em. Don't make a sound. Let's all remove our shoes," replied Bircham.

His injunction was obeyed, and a moment subsequently he and his two employes were stealing down the companion-way.

At the foot of the flight they met Meter.

The Dutchman came last. Bircham led. In his hand he carried a dark lantern which he had snatched up as he ran from his cabin.

If any one had closely observed the face of the Dutchman at the moment when the old proprietor of the floating prison-school told him about the boys getting out of the school-room, it might have been noted that he looked very much startled.

The party who meant to take the boys by surprise in the hold had almost reached the store-room, when the Dutchman suddenly stumbled against Jeff, and sent that colored gentleman reeling against a loosely piled stock of empty boxes.

Down came the whole stock with a crash and clatter sufficient to alarm every person on board the floating school.

If the Dutchman had wished to alarm the boys, and so give them an opportunity to escape without betraying his own instrumentality in the matter he could scarcely have adopted a better plan.

"Forward!" cried Bircham. "Durn that blundering nigger; he's spoiled our surprise!"

The next instant the door of the store-room was reached by Bircham. He saw the door was open, and beyond it, under the school-room, he saw Frank Sax.

The boys had just sent up the last basket load of provisions, and all save Frank had climbed up through the hole.

As Bircham saw the latter he also caught a glimpse of the legs of a boy, who was getting up through the hole in the floor. That personage was Tom.

"Quick, Tom! Here's Bircham!" shouted Frank to expedite the movements of his brother, for he could not climb up through the hole while Tom was in the way.

Tom struggled up as fast as he could, but he was not quick enough to give Frank the chance he wanted. As Tom disappeared Bircham seized Frank by the collar and in an instant the boy was surrounded and all hope of escape was cut off.

The old wretch who had clutched Frank in his rage dealt the boy a blow with his open hand upon the side of the face that knocked him down.

Then he reached a broken box-cover, and he was about to belabor the unlucky boy with the bludgeon when a strange sound came from behind the boxes further on.

It was a terrible groan.

"Ghosts! Golly, I speck it am de ghost ob de boys' dat was in de black hole!" exclaimed Jeff.

Inspired by guilty terror Bircham started backward, and he stumbled over something and fell.

Hans Schneider's foot was the object over which Bircham stumbled. It almost seemed that the Dutchman had purposely tripped him.

Frank was on his feet in an instant. But as he arose Mr. Meter seized him. Bircham scrambled up and advanced with his lantern in hand. A moment later he discovered Moon where the boys had left him.

Moon was quickly released.

Just then Bill Keen, who had followed Bircham and the others, came forward. He had heard Moon's groans attributed to the ghost of Teddy Lindsley.

Bill hastened to explain that the boy who disappeared from the black hole was alive and in the school-room.

Bircham's amazement was boundless.

He could not comprehend the strange circumstances of Teddy's escape, unless there was treachery against him at work; in fact, the cunning old fellow decided that such was the case.

But he did not say anything about his suspicions. He resolved, however, that he would keep a close watch on all hands, and he mentally vowed that it should go hard with any one whom he might find to be secretly working against him.

"Bring the ring-leader of the pirates along to my cabin. I want to question him a bit in private before I decide on his punishment. Oh, I'll make it pleasant for him presently!" said Bircham, after he had listened to Moon's explanation of how he had been captured.

Frank was dragged along the passage; Hans and Jeff were directed to take charge of him, and they led him along, while the others went ahead.

Bill Keen took great pleasure in Frank's discomfiture, and he said, exultantly:

"I told you I'd get even with you, Frank Sax, and you bet I've kept my word."

Frank made no reply, and the cabin of the school tyrant was almost reached when a whisper sounded in Frank's ear, and he heard the following words:

"Keep up your courage and you will be protected."

Frank gave a start of surprise.

He could almost have sworn it was the Dutchman who spoke those encouraging words. But as he glanced at Hans he saw the German was looking another way, and then the whispered words were not spoken in the German dialect, which seemed to characterize all of Hans' utterances.

Frank was mystified. But the suspicion became strong in his mind that after all Hans Schneider was something more than the ignorant, stolidly good-natured Dutchman he seemed.

A thrilling thought flashed through Frank's mind, and he asked himself if it could be that he had discovered the secret helper sent by Bruce Baldwin.

CHAPTER XII.

FRANK DOOMED—THE MAN FROM THE WAVES.

Frank was conducted into Bircham's cabin, and all save the proprietor of the floating school and his tutors, Moon and Meter, withdrew.

Bircham locked the door, and Frank began to doubt if he

would be protected after all, despite the mysterious assurance he had received.

"Now, then, Mr. Meter, search the young rascal!" ordered Bircham.

Frank knew it would be useless to attempt to resist, and so he suffered himself to be searched.

The card of Bruce Baldwin, with the message written upon it, was found in one of Frank's pockets.

Bircham read the message.

His red, bloated face turned pale as he comprehended all it meant.

"Good Heaven, man!" exclaimed he. "Don't you see this is certain sure evidence that there is a traitor on the floating school? A spy sent to find out how things are conducted here. And to think that Bruce Baldwin escaped after all! Why, I'd wagered any money he couldn't have made the land."

"That's so. I say, old man, we're in danger of being driven out of the neat little business you have set up here on the old vessel. We've got to find out Bruce Baldwin's spy and get rid of him, or it's all up with Dr. Bircham's Floating School, I should say," rejoined Meter.

"Yes, we're in danger, but I don't know who to suspect. All we can do is to watch Jeff and the Dutchman," said Bircham.

"And we've got to fix the young mutineers. Things can't go on this way. Now they have got a supply of food there's no telling how long they will stand a siege."

"That's so. But now let me question this young rascal a bit."

Bircham turned to Frank as he spoke and said:

"Now, then, if you want to keep a whole bone in your body you answer me truthfully and tell me how Teddy Lindsley got out of the black hole."

"I don't know," replied Frank promptly.

"I think you are telling a lie," said Bircham.

"Keep on thinking so, if you like, I can't help it. But if you had little Ted himself here, you couldn't find out how he escaped. He don't know himself."

"What do you mean? Don't dare to trifle with me, sir."

"I mean just what I say. Ted was carried out of the black hole while he was in a faint, and he don't know who his rescuer was. That's the long and short of it."

Bircham was watching Frank keenly, and he decided the boy had told the truth.

"You didn't happen to find a note I lost in the school-room, did you?" he then asked.

"Yes, I did. It was written by my uncle, Barton Sax. I shouldn't wonder if you and he were called upon to explain the bargain to kill Tom and I, which the note alludes to, some day."

Bircham looked positively alarmed.

But he exclaimed quickly:

"Where is that note? You have entirely misapprehended its meaning," and he forced a laugh.

"The note is in good hands, don't worry. It will be well taken care of," replied Frank.

The truth was, he had chanced to entrust the note to his brother Tom, and very glad he now was that he had done so.

Bircham remained silent for a moment.

"Things are really getting even more serious than I supposed here. Well, we will, for the present, lock this boy up in the empty cabin next mine. Then we'll hold a further consultation," said the old villain, finally.

"Why not chuck him in the black hole?" growled Moon.

"Because, if you dare put me out of the way as long as Barton Sax's tell-tale note is in existence, you will be in danger of being called to account for murder! That's why Bircham hesitates about ending my career. I can read the old villain's thoughts," cried Frank in bold, indignant tones.

"Enough! Your hour of punishment will come!" cried Bircham, flushing guiltily.

Then Frank was conducted to the next cabin, and there locked up.

While Frank was left a prey to doubts and fears, Bircham and the tutors held a long conversation in the old principal's room.

The night wore on.

Frank was desperate enough to undertake almost any venture that promised the least chance for escape.

He was by no means sure that Bruce Baldwin's mysterious agent could accomplish his rescue, no matter how earnestly that as yet almost unknown personage might seek to do so.

The brave boy had not been long in the cabin before he had investigated it thoroughly, and satisfied himself as to all the chances for or against the success of an attempt at escape.

For more than one hour the rain had been falling.

The storm had commenced gradually, and it had gathered augmented force until now the accession of a high wind drove the billows in great surges over the sand bar upon which the floating school was grounded.

Afar, as Frank saw by an occasional flash of lightning while he stood at the small circular cabin window, the dark waters of the lake, which were the barrier between himself and freedom, were lashed in fury.

The window of the cabin in which Frank was now a prisoner was of the same size as those of the school-room in the saloon.

Frank could have squeezed himself through the window.

Indeed, a larger person than himself could have done so. But he felt that it would be suicidal—that no attempt to reach the land in that wild storm would prove successful, even though he might succeed in getting off with the boat.

He opened the window and the wind sent a gust of spray in his face. The lightning at the same time came in great brilliancy.

By its glaring, far-reaching light, the boy prisoner of the floating school fancied he saw a small boat at some distance, containing a single person.

Frank was thrilled and startled.

He waited breathlessly for the light to come again. The next flash of the lightning was as brilliant as the one that had preceded it.

But it disclosed not the solitary boat at the mercy of the waves on the tempest-tossed lake.

Frank shuddered. He believed he could not have been self-deceived, and that he had really seen a boat. If so he thought it had been swamped during the brief interval between the flashes of lightning.

But he knew well enough no fisherman from the village on the shore would have ventured on the lake in that storm.

Some way Frank was rather inclined to conjecture that the boat had contained some one who was bound for the floating school, and he decided that whoever it might have been, he had found a grave at the bottom of the lake.

Finally Frank fell asleep.

Meantime a desperate attempt was being made by Bircham's orders looking to the getting back of the note he had lost, which was an evidence of criminal intentions.

Frank's dreams were not pleasant ones, and he was awakened suddenly by the cold spray from the tempest-tossed billows dashing in his face.

He sprang up and found the window open.

"Ah, I neglected to fasten it. The wind has blown it open!" exclaimed Frank, as he closed the window and secured it.

A moment and he caught the sound of footsteps.

They were coming to the cabin where he was.

Frank wondered what new change in the circumstances of his perilous experience was now at hand.

He was not long left in uncertainty and suspense.

Almost immediately the door opened and Dr. Bircham entered.

He spoke not a word until he had closed the door behind

him and secured it. Then, as he raised a small pair of handcuffs which he held in one hand, he hissed exultantly:

"I've secured the note written by Barton Sax. There's not a chance of its ever being used as evidence against me now. In the old days, when I sailed under the black flag we used to have a motto, 'Dead men tell no tales.' Neither do dead boys, I believe. Anyhow, I am going to handcuff you and set you adrift through the window. You are the one who has caused all the trouble on the floating school, and I'm through with you."

Bircham advanced upon the terror-stricken boy.

Where now was Bruce Baldwin's secret agent?

Was Frank doomed?

It indeed seemed that such was surely the fact.

But suddenly a human form sprang from behind the bunk, and Frank beheld Eric Lee, whom Barton Sax had falsely accused, and sent to prison.

CHAPTER XIII.

ERIC LEE PLAYS A STRANGE PART.

The sight of Eric Lee was a thrilling surprise to Frank, and Dr. Bircham was as completely astounded and frightened as a man could well be.

Eric presented a weird, strange appearance. His clothing was dripping wet; he was without a hat, and his hair hung dank and disordered over his eyes. His pleasing, intelligent face was very pale, but his eyes were flashing. There was something ominous in their expression, Bircham fancied, and in truth, withal, Eric Lee was a weird, startling apparition.

Whence had he come? How had he gained admission to the cabin? His appearance spoke of a conflict with the waves.

Bircham did not know Eric Lee.

But the old fellow believed upon the instant that he was face to face with a foe—his supposition was that the man before him was Bruce Baldwin's agent—the spy whose presence he had suspected.

"Who are you? What are you doing here?" demanded Bircham, as soon as he could find voice to speak.

"Do you not see that I have come from the lake? I was caught in the storm. I had set out to cross the lake. I saw I could not reach the shore. This vessel was nearer. The lightning disclosed its position, and I made for it. But my boat was overturned by the waves. Then I fought for my life in the raging waters. A rope hung near the window yonder. I grasped it finally and succeeded in climbing into this cabin," said Eric Lee.

The young man had as yet made no apparent recognition of Frank Sax. Neither had the lad said or done anything to tell Bircham that he and the man from the lake were known to each other.

But Frank was about to speak and call upon Eric for protection against Bircham, when he was prevented from doing so by the remark quickly added by Eric:

"Now, sir, I've told you how I came here, let me inquire who you are, and who this lad is whom I have heard you threaten?"

As Eric Lee thus spoke he shot Frank a telegraphic glance full of meaning. The boy comprehended then that it was Eric's purpose to cause Bircham to suppose they were strangers.

Bircham had backed against the door. He had the key in his hand, and it was his intention to suddenly open the door, dart out, and by securing the door on the outside before he could be followed, make the stranger a prisoner.

This plan had entered his mind before he heard the explanation Eric had made.

He might yet have carried it into execution, but Frank's friend turned partially, and he saw on the back of the prison blouse he wore the wide black stripe which made the costume of all the inmates of the Valeville jail conspicuous.

When a man was placed in the Valeville jail he was compelled to don the prison uniform at once.

"Ha!" exclaimed Bircham. "I think I understand why you avoided saying who you were just now, and I can guess why you were trying to cross the lake such a night as this. You are an escaped jail bird!"

Bircham pointed at the tell-tale prison blouse as he spoke.

Eric's face flushed but he answered instantly:

"I am a fugitive, and I am a desperate man. Drop that key. Do not make an attempt to leave this room until you or I come to an understanding!"

Bircham saw a dirk-knife, which Eric had suddenly drawn, appear in the young man's hand. He read determination in the expression of his face. The tyrant of the floating school was a coward at heart, and he dared not brave the desperate man before him, and so he dropped the key on the floor.

"Now, then, do you mean to send me back to prison to prevent my final escape, or can you and I come to terms?" demanded Eric.

Bircham had thought fast. In the desperate man whom he believed Eric to be, and he must now conclude, after all, was not Bruce Baldwin's agent, he thought he might find a tool willing to serve him to secure his protection.

So he said:

"We will consider this matter calmly. In the first place, let me tell you you are now on board Dr. Bircham's floating school. This lad is one of my pupils. You heard me trying to frighten him. It is one of my forms of punishment to do so. You want to escape; what are you willing to do in return for my protection?"

"Anything. Hide me on board this vessel for a time until the hue and cry die out; then give me a chance to escape, and I'll serve you in any way you may suggest."

"Very well, so be it. Come with me and we will talk further," replied Bircham.

And he added mentally:

"This fellow I may use to make way with the Sax brothers, I'll let the guilt of the actual commission of the crime rest with him."

Bircham had suddenly resolved to trust the fugitive. While Frank remained speechless in surprise Bircham led the way from the cabin followed by Eric Lee, who said as they went out:

"Remember, Bircham, you are dealing with a desperate man. I'll not be trifled with."

The door closed and Frank was again alone. But he was not hopeless now, for of course he knew that Eric Lee was playing a part looking to his final rescue.

Meantime, just before Bircham and Eric Lee came out of the cabin a man glided away from the door. He had been listening there.

Bircham would have been very much surprised if he could have seen him, for the spy was Hans Schneider. The Dutchman had heard all that had taken place in the cabin.

Bircham conducted Eric Lee to his own cabin. There he provided him with a change of clothing and refreshments, of which the young man stood in great need.

Then a long conversation ensued between them.

Again there was an eavesdropper.

Hans Schneider's ear was at the key hole of Bircham's cabin door a moment after the tyrant of the school on the lake had entered with Eric.

Bircham broached the subject he had in mind rather cautiously.

He was crafty enough to feel his way, as one may say. If the escaping man was not likely to undertake the commission of a great crime, Bircham did not mean to place himself in his power by proposing it too plainly.

But Eric Lee continued to play his part.

He deceived Bircham completely, and they had not conversed very long before the old villain concluded that he might safely proceed with less caution.

Presently, in the course of the conversation that ensued, he said:

"So you would be willing to earn your escape and a couple of hundred dollars by allowing an accident to happen to the two lads I've mentioned?"

"Yes, now we understand each other perfectly. But it must seem like a real accident. I don't mean to stretch hemp. I must have a chance to save my neck, if the fate of the lads is ever ferreted out."

"Well, you can plan the venture in your own way, only so you make sure that the Sax boys find a grave at the bottom of the lake."

"All right, then. You say they would take any risk to escape?"

"Yes, there can be no doubt of that."

"Very well, then. I'll help them."

"What do you mean? Let me hear your plan in full."

"It's simple enough. You'll fix things to let me get off with the boys in the night in a boat. The boat will be found floating bottom up. It will be supposed the boys have accidentally drowned. No one need know they were knocked on the head and thrown overboard. It will be an easy matter for me to set the boat adrift bottom side up after I have disposed of the boys and reached the shore in safety myself."

"That's true. I like your plan, and I believe it will work well. You must gain the confidence of the boys. Your secret shall be kept by me. I'll introduce you as a new employe and personal friend of mine to the other men here. You shall carry Frank Sax his food, and between you you can hatch a plan to get away with Frank and his brother as soon as possible."

"To-morrow night it shall be done, then, if all goes well."

"Good. As I said before, the sooner the better. And now to explain something about the peculiar situation of affairs here on board the floating school. The fact is, the boys have revolted, and they hold possession of the school-room in the saloon."

Bircham went on to explain at some length all about the revolt of the students, and Eric Lee listened with great interest.

But we need not record what Bircham said, as the reader is already familiar with the incidents he narrated.

We shall state, however, that the school tyrant spoke truthfully, when he informed Frank Sax that he had obtained possession of the tell-tale note written by Barton Sax, which Frank had left in the care of his brother Tom.

This had been accomplished by Bill Keen.

The boy had again re-entered the school-room through the little port window, and while Tom slept Keen stole the note from his pocket. Tom had taken off his coat, and Keen found the note in that garment.

The saloon was in darkness. The young rascal was not detected, and he made his way back to Bircham with the note in safety.

When morning came the storm had subsided.

The day opened bright and beautiful. The boys of the prison-school watched a brilliant sunrise, and wondered if it was a good omen.

CHAPTER XIV.

A STRATAGEM TO OUTWIT BIRCHAM.

In the morning Bircham introduced Eric Lee to his tutors and the two employes under the name of Jason Bent.

Bircham stated that the gentleman was an old friend of his who had arrived during the night while he, Bircham, was standing watch. After making the arrangements we have stated with Eric Lee, they had decided on the story Bircham was to tell, for the old school tyrant did not mean to tell his confederates the truth.

Presently, after he had been duly introduced, Eric pretended to make a discovery which was necessary to make his supposed arrival seem probable.

Going to the ship's side, he suddenly shouted:

"My boat is gone. It is not where I secured it when I left it last night!"

Bircham joined Eric at the rail, and appeared to share his surprise, while he said:

"You must have failed to fasten the boat secure, I take it. Well, there's little chance you'll ever see it again. It has probably drifted ashore by this time, and a good boat is always a good find for the fishermen, who will likely pick it up."

There was more talk about the boat, and Eric, in order to answer questions put to him by Moon and Meter, had to invent a story of a successful conflict with the storm.

Finally Eric went down to the cabin in which Frank was a prisoner.

He carried a tray of food for the boy's breakfast, and Bircham confidently expected soon to have his report that he and Frank had arranged a plot which would result in the doom of the lad.

When Eric entered the cabin Frank sprang forward impulsively to meet him. But the young man made the lad a warning signal and carefully locked the door before a word was spoken.

Then he turned to Frank and said in a whisper:

"Speak low, and come to the end of the cabin furthest from the door. If we are overheard all is lost."

Frank followed his friend across the cabin.

Then they shook hands warmly, and Frank said:

"You have deceived Bircham. You mean to help me and the poor boys who are the old tyrant's victims in this terrible prison-school?"

"Yes—yes. You see I escaped from the town jail last night, and as I told Bircham, it was only by accident I reached the floating school, for I had no idea you were here."

"You came in through the window while I slept?"

"Yes. And I did not see your face in the gloom. I meant to remain concealed in the cabin until the storm passed, and then swim off for the shore. But when Bircham came and made his terrible threat to drown you, I determined to save you, no matter what the consequences to myself might be."

"You are a brave, true-hearted fellow. Now tell me how you mean to help me?"

"Bircham has told me all about the situation here, and I've duped him completely," replied Eric.

Then he went on to tell of the plan he and Bircham had arranged for the Sax brothers to be drowned by himself while they were led to suppose he was bent on helping them to escape.

"Bravo! We shall succeed. But the other boys. As it seems, they must remain and trust to Bruce Baldwin's secret agent to help them," said Frank.

This remark called for an explanation and Frank went on to tell what the reader already knows about the hope and the assurance the imperiled boys had of protection from Bruce Baldwin's mysterious agent.

Then Eric and Frank talked about the events of the past.

Frank asked Eric for particulars regarding the dishonesty and duplicity of his Uncle Barton.

Thereupon the young clerk said:

"Barton Sax is a scoundrel. He sought to tempt me to forge your father's name to a bogus will which he gave me to copy. My refusal to do so coupled with the fact of the villain's discovery that I was the accepted suitor of Ethel Barrington, the heiress, caused Barton Sax to seek to ruin me."

"But he will not succeed. You will yet prove your innocence?"

"I hope so. Indeed, I cannot believe that the guilty man will triumph always. But, Frank, once you are clear of this terrible floating prison, you must find some true friend of

your late father to assist you in wresting your just inheritance from Barton Sax. The villain means to defraud you and Tom completely."

"Oh, what a villain! And he is my uncle, too!"

"I have seen the true will of your father, which I presume Barton Sax has destroyed before this time."

"What was the contents of the true document?"

"I cannot repeat it all now. Suffice it for me to say, however, that its contents served to show conclusively that your father died possessed of a handsome little fortune."

"How was it bequeathed?"

"As I have already as good as stated. The money and property was all to be divided equally between yourself and your brother Tom."

"Well, if we escape, we will go to my uncle, Martin Hudson, of Blandenburg, sixty miles up the river. He is my deceased mother's only brother, and I am sure he is an honest man."

"Then go to him by all means, and tell him what I have informed you regarding your father's will."

"Meantime what will you do?" asked Frank.

"I shall be guided by circumstances."

"Do you mean to leave the country?"

"Not for good. The truth is I have resolved to seek a friend of mine who resides in a distant city."

"He is a strange, eccentric character—a philanthropist, a lover of exciting adventure and dangerous undertakings—wealthy and well able to gratify his tastes. I know that more than once he has spent much time and money in aiding wronged men. I do not think he will refuse to assist me."

"What is the name of this excellent and remarkable gentleman?" asked Frank with interest.

"Warren Bennett."

"Indeed. I shall remember his name. If by any chance my Uncle Martin should not assist me against Barton Sax I, too, may appeal to him."

"Do so by all means, if necessary. But see your uncle Martin Hudson first."

"Now the question is, how to get Tom out of the school-room," Eric added.

"Oh, since Bircham is unwittingly helping us while he supposes he is sending us to our doom, that is not a difficult matter."

"How will you manage it?"

"Why, you let me out at night. I'll go to the hole in the floor and get Tom to come down and join me in the hold. You post Bircham as to our plan so I will not be interfered with."

"I will do so, certainly. And now since we understand each other I'll go. Of course I'll arrange it with Bircham so that no one will attempt to prevent our appropriating a boat when the time comes to-night to do so."

Thus speaking, Eric again shook hands with Frank, and then he withdrew.

Meantime Bircham was making arrangements to capture the rebellious school-boys as soon as he believed himself to be rid of the Sax brothers.

He called Jeff, who was an excellent oarsman, and the two rowed away in the ship's boat for the village, comprised of rude fishermen, on the nearest shore.

Arriving at the village, Bircham sought the cabin occupied by old Dan Bronson, the fisherman who had betrayed Frank and Tom into the power of the enemy.

Old Dan and his stalwart son were at work in front of the cabin mending their nets when Bircham and Jeff came up.

"Good-morning, doctor, good-morning!" was the very cordial greeting which old Dan gave the doctor, while he eyed him critically as if to find out what the object of his visit was.

"Good morning, Daniel, my good friend, and good morning to your hopeful son. I want a word or two with you in private. We will go into the cabin, if you please. Jeff, you remain outside and keep an eye on the boat," responded Bircham.

"Welcome you are, doctor, at all times. Walk in," said old Dan, and he held the cabin door open. A moment later Bircham and the two rascally fishermen, father and son, were seated inside of the cabin.

"I've got a job on hand for you that is worth a hundred, if you like to take it," then began Bircham.

"What's the nature of the work?" asked old Dan, filling his short pipe and beginning to smoke vigorously.

"Just this: The boys have revolted, the whole school is in the mutiny, and I want you to come on board to-night with a gang of a dozen men you can depend upon and help me bring the young mutineers to terms."

"I'll do it; I'll be on hand. But at what time?"

"Can't say as to that yet. I'll give you a signal; three flashes of a red light will be your call," replied Bircham. He went on and explained the situation on the floating school further, and then he and Jeff rowed back to the old vessel.

CHAPTER XV.

A SECRET FRIEND UNMASKED—A THRILLING MOMENT.

Tom Sax experienced such anxiety and sorrow on account of Frank's capture by Bircham as may easily be surmised.

The strongest brotherly affection had always existed between Tom and Frank, and poor Tom was ready to do anything, no matter how desperate the undertaking might be, to save Frank.

But the case seemed to be entirely a hopeless one.

Tom was compelled to let the fate of his brother remain in the hands of destiny. When the morning succeeding the night of Frank's capture dawned, Tom awoke from a troubled sleep at an early hour.

He then put on his coat and at once missed the note written by Barton Sax with the care of which Frank had intrusted him.

Tom knew at once that the note must have been stolen from his coat pocket while he slept. But for a moment he knew not whom to suspect. Suddenly, however, he thought of Bill Keen.

Tom went at once to the closet. Then the discovery of the treacherous lad's flight was made.

All the boys were surprised, and when they heard of Tom's loss they accorded him sympathy.

The besieged lads did not suffer for want of food or drink that day and Bircham did not offer them any new terms of surrender.

In fact, the lads were left to themselves. The hours were suspenseful ones, especially to Tom, in view of his uncertainty regarding Frank's fate.

Toward noon, however, his mind was set at rest. All along he had found some consolation in the recollection of the assurance the mysterious note written on Bruce Baldwin's card had given him.

As Tom was examining the fastenings of the door he saw a slip of paper which had evidently been pushed under the door from the outside.

With eager curiosity Tom picked up the paper and having opened it he found it to be a note written in the same hand as the communication on Bruce Baldwin's card.

The note read as follows:

"Frank is unharmed. Rest easy in the assurance that he will be protected."

"Again a mysterious message. Bruce Baldwin's agent is surely here. Thank Providence that Frank has a secret friend at hand," thought Tom.

"But why does that friend hide himself, then? Why does he

not do something to save us all, as I am sure must be the design Bruce Baldwin has in mind?" he added mentally.

Tom did not stop to reflect that in dealing with such a villain as Bircham the accumulation of positive evidence must be made to secure their merited punishment.

The lads did not consider that any decisive action, if made without proper consideration and maturity of plans, might, by its premature execution, serve to defeat its own purpose.

If Tom had stopped to think the matter over carefully, he might have concluded that the delay in openly crushing Bircham, which, it seemed, Bruce Baldwin's agent was guilty of, was probably made to enable the spy to arrange his plans and get his evidence against the old villain all complete for a grand final coup.

The events of the day were not marked with incidents of exciting interest. Night came, and then the thrilling action of events was resumed.

Tom was seated near the hole in the floor of the school-room.

Suddenly he heard a voice.

A thrill shot through the lad's heart, for he recognized the voice of his brother Frank. Tom stooped and spoke through the hole.

"Is that you, Frank?" he asked.

"Yes. Drop down here. Fear nothing, but come and say nothing to the rest of the boys," came Frank's reply.

In accordance with the ruse Eric Lee had planned, Frank was now seeking to get his brother out of the school-room.

So great was Tom's confidence in his brother that without a moment's hesitation or delay for explanation or further assurance he let himself down through the hole.

As it was dark in the school-room and none of the boys were near him, Tom's departure by the hole in the floor was not noted by his young school-mates.

The brothers met in the dark hold. Frank gave Tom his hand and conducted him along toward the bulkhead, and to a door which communicated with the passage leading to the companion-way and the cabins amidships.

As they went along Frank whispered a brief outline of Eric Lee's ruse. Tom was amazed, but Frank cautioned him not to speak. In safety they reached the cabin in which Frank was supposed to be confined. A few moments previously Eric Lee had released him.

Eric was now in the cabin awaiting the return of Frank with his brother.

The two lads entered, and as the night had now advanced to the hour when the escape was to be made, after a few words were exchanged Eric conducted them to the deck.

It seemed deserted. But Eric knew Bircham had managed that and he surmised that the old villain was concealed somewhere near at hand, watching all their movements.

The funny side of the affair—old Bircham so innocently playing his game to save the boys whom he really meant to drown—struck the lads and they chuckled to themselves as they followed Eric.

He led them to the stern where the landing ladder hung. There a boat, which had previously been lowered from the davits, swung upon the water.

The two were about to descend, when all at once a dark form glided up from the shadows beside the rail.

"Hans, the Dutchman! We are discovered!" said Frank, in a low, thrilling whisper.

Eric snatched up an oar which lay on the deck, and like a flash he swung it in the air and held it poised over Hans' head.

"One word! One cry of alarm, and I'll strike you down!" he exclaimed.

"Hold!" answered the Dutchman. "I have here a note that the Sax brothers should preserve."

As he spoke, the man placed a folded paper in Frank's hand, and under the brilliant moonlight, Frank saw at a single glance that it was the note from Barton Sax which had been stolen from Tom.

Frank told his companions the ensuing instant.

"Who are you?" demanded the boy of Hans then.

"Yes," asked Eric, "tell us who you are. Surely I detected something familiar in your voice, and I am confident you are not what you seem."

"Do not tarry here to question me. Go while you may, but to satisfy you I will tell you I am Bruce Baldwin's agent," answered Hans in a whisper.

"So I suspected!" said Frank.

The next moment the two boys descended to the boat.

Eric remained standing at the head of the ladder for a moment like one slightly dazed. Then suddenly he said:

"Now I know you," addressing Hans.

"And I know you. You are Eric Lee, lately escaped from the Valeville jail," replied the other.

"Now who am I?" he added.

"You are Warren Bennett."

"Right. But go now, and at once. Take my advice, and make for Indian Island. You have a friend in Warren Bennett. Remain in hiding on Indian Island until you hear from me, and keep the boys with you. I have a rude fishing lodge on the island, hidden away in the thickest part of the timber. You can find snug quarters, as well as a supply of provisions there."

Thus speaking, Hans pressed Eric's hand, and the latter sprang down the gangway ladder and leaped into the boat. The boys held the oars poised. They were at home in the water, and the next moment they sent the boat speeding through the waves with lusty strokes.

Indian Island was some miles distant, in the center of the lake. Eric told the boys what had passed between him and Bruce Baldwin's agent, and they pulled for the island.

But as they approached it a boat containing eight men, including Barton Sax, the others being ruffians from the fishing village, suddenly shot into view, and Barton Sax shouted as he pointed at the boys' boat:

"There he is! A hundred dollars for the capture of the jail-bird, Eric Lee!"

CHAPTER XVI.

A RACE ON THE LAKE—SAVED BY THE REEF.

The escape of Eric Lee from the Valeville jail had been discovered early in the morning on the day succeeding the night of his flight.

The news of the escape had soon reached Barton Sax, and the vindictive, guilty conspirator had at once resolved that, if possible, his victim should be recaptured.

Among the clients of the vindictive lawyer was an old farmer, who lived in the country south of the town of Valeville, and about two miles from Boone Lake.

Quite by accident Barton Sax received a clew to the direction Eric Lee had taken in his flight from the old farmer. The latter chanced to make a business call at the lawyer's office that morning, and he mentioned incidentally that he had seen a strange young man crossing his meadows, in the direction of the lake, late the preceding night.

The old farmer had been returning from a fishing excursion at the time. He said the stranger had not answered a friendly salutation which he had given him, but on the contrary hastened on at increased speed.

Of course Barton Sax's suspicions were at once awakened. He conjectured that it was quite probable that the stranger was Eric Lee.

To substantiate his suspicion and gain a more definite clew to the identity of the stranger, he questioned his informant and obtained a description of the young man whom the latter had met.

The storm which Eric had encountered on the lake had not

commenced when the old farmer met the stranger. It was then moonlight and consequently the countryman was able to describe the fugitive quite accurately.

When he had done so Barton Sax was positive of his identity.

"That man was Eric Lee," he said to himself. Then getting rid of his client as soon as possible, he set out to organize a search for the young fugitive on his own account.

Already, as may be supposed, the sheriff and his deputies were scouring the country about Valeville in quest of the jail-breaker.

But Barton Sax did not appeal to the regular authorities for assistance, or make his discovery generally known.

On the contrary, he rode out to the fisherman's settlement on the lake as fast as a swift horse could carry him, and sought old Dan Bronson.

Barton Sax already conjectured that Eric had crossed the lake, or intended so doing. He consulted with old Dan, and the result was that the fisherman secured him a party of his comrades, and led by one of the lake men, who was familiar with the country all along the water-side, a close search was commenced.

But it proved unsuccessful.

At nightfall the hunters met on the lake shore, and held a consultation.

While they were talking, a fisherman, who lived at some distance from the main lake side hamlet, and near where Barton Sax and his men had assembled, came up and reported that one of his boats had been stolen the preceding night.

This was regarded as important news.

"The chances are Eric Lee stole the boat. If he has crossed the lake, and made off through the wooded country beyond it, we shall not find him, but there is a bare chance that the storm of last night may have driven him to one of the islands. His boat may have been wrecked, and if so he may have been detained on an island," suggested one of the men.

"That's true. The chance of finding him is a slender one enough, it appears, still we will take a boat and explore the island," said Sax.

This resolution was carried into execution.

There were several islands in the lake besides the one called Indian Island, and it was late before the searchers who chanced first to visit all the other islands reached Indian Island.

Having explored it, and failed to find any one there, and also having overlooked Warren Bennett's well-concealed fishing-lodge, the party was rowing away, when upon rounding a headland they sighted the fugitives from the floating school and Eric, as narrated.

It was a thrilling moment for the fugitives as they beheld their arch-enemy so unexpectedly. The surprise was complete and most alarming.

The four-oared boat, laden with their enemies, could certainly overtake them very soon, if it came to a race on the water, they feared.

For an instant the magnitude of the peril which had so abruptly come upon them seemed to rob the young fugitives of their presence of mind.

Their boat remained almost motionless, while, with Barton Sax's alarming shout of: "There he is! A hundred dollars for the capture of the jail-bird, Eric Lee!" ringing in their ears, they saw the enemy's boat swiftly propelled toward them.

But the distance that intervened between the two boats was still considerable, and the spell of consternation that held the fugitives was quickly broken.

Eric Lee thought swiftly.

He thought of all the chances. The boat of the enemy had just rounded a headland, as stated, coming from the south. The fugitive boat was as near the land as the enemy's craft, and on the north side of the jutting land.

"Pull for your life, Frank!" cried Eric suddenly. "We'll

make the land yet ahead of them, if I can foul them on the sunken reefs!"

Then he and Frank bent to their oars with a will that made the boat fairly bound through the waves.

Eric was familiar with the island, and he knew a long reef ran out beyond the headland, into which the enemy's boat would run if they tried to cut him off.

The fishermen, too, must have known about the reef, which was only below water level. But in their haste to earn the reward promised by Barton Sax it appeared they must have forgotten it.

At all events, on they came in a course that if not interrupted must bring them across the bows of the fugitives in a few moments.

"Stop! Drop your oars, you scoundrels!" shouted Barton Sax.

He had recognized Frank and Tom as well as Eric, and his rage and consternation may be imagined. In truth, Barton Sax was not only surprised, but intensely alarmed. The guilty man feared the boys he had so cruelly wronged, and whom he meant to deprive of their inheritance.

He had never for a moment feared that they could make their escape from the floating school, for Bircham had positively assured him that such a thing was wholly impossible, and had never occurred.

The villainous attorney's knowledge of the law gave him the unwelcome assurance that if the boys finally eluded him and made good their escape, a day of bitter reckoning might yet be in store for him.

And so, in urging the pursuit as he did, the conspirator was prompted by a two-fold motive. He sought not only the recapture of Eric, but fully as ardently desired to take Frank and Tom prisoners.

On, on through the dancing waves flew the boat of the young fugitives, and at the best rate of speed the fishermen could attain came the pursuers.

But suddenly there was a grating crash and the sound of snapping wood. The enemy's boat had run upon the reef. An oar had broken, the boat was damaged and Barton Sax by the shock of the sudden grounding of the speeding craft, was pitched overboard.

"Hurrah!" shouted Frank lustily. "We are all right now!" and on, on went the boat from the floating school, and while the fishermen were engaged in getting the damaged boat off the reef the boys and their young friend gained the shore.

The boat was guided into a sheltered cove.

There it was grounded on the gently sloping sands, and the fugitives took time to breathe and rest.

"They will beat over the whole island after us, after a while, if we remain here. I propose that we lead them to think we have crossed the lake," said Eric.

A few moments later the fugitives pulled away in the direction of the distant shore opposite the fishing village, and the enemy saw them finally disappear in the shadows of the distant, densely wooded main-land, but were unable to follow.

CHAPTER XVII.

HANS' SECRET DISCOVERED—THE SPY DOOMED.

As stated, Barton Sax's rage at the escape of Eric and his two nephews may be imagined. But there was no help for it. The fisherman's boat had been so badly damaged on the reef that it had to be towed along the bar to the island and there it took an hour's work to make it safe to attempt to reach the shore in.

Meantime, from the shadow line of the further shore, Frank and Tom, with Eric Lee, watched the enemy until they saw them pull for the opposite side of the lake and finally out of sight.

Then they rowed for Indian Island.

That land was soon reached, and having hidden the boat under the willows that closely fringed the shore of a little inlet, they set out to find Warren Bennett's lodge.

Although, as we have said, Warren Bennett lived in a distant city, he had for several years visited Boone Lake and the surrounding country every summer for a long fishing and hunting trip.

Though the fishermen had not found the eccentric sportsman's lodge, Frank and his companions, after a close search, succeeded in doing so.

Bennett's lodge was merely a little log cabin, weather-tight, with an earthen floor, and its exterior was well covered with evergreen boughs, so that one might pass quite near it without detecting it. The trees, whose branches covered and concealed the cabin, grew thickly all around it.

Inside the rude structure the fugitives found a supply of fishing materials, rods, lines, reels, scoop-nets, etc. There were a couple of large supply chests filled with hard-tack, canned meats, vegetables, a ham and several bottles of liquors.

The fugitives also found a shotgun and a rifle hidden in the roof, with a supply of ammunition for each weapon.

"Well, here we are, fitted out in good shape to live like three jolly Robinson Crusoes for a long time," said Frank, when all the discoveries enumerated had been made.

"That's so. And with Warren Bennett, the eccentric philanthropist and sportsman, to help us we shall come out all right yet, I hope," replied Eric.

Then he explained how he had come to make the acquaintance of Warren Bennett years previously, and that he had once saved that gentleman's life.

"Isn't it a remarkable coincidence that Bruce Baldwin's secret agent should turn out to be the very man you meant to seek the assistance of?" remarked Frank.

"It is, indeed, and in him the boys of the floating school surely have a champion who will yet save them all," replied Eric, in tones of assurance.

Then, while they discussed their plans for the future and speculated regarding what events might yet transpire on board the floating school, they proceeded to make themselves as comfortable as possible.

They were all hungry, and they made an excellent lunch from the contents of the eccentric sportsman's supply chests.

The boys would have enjoyed the camping out experience completely if it had not been that they were fugitives and that they felt that they might even yet be hunted out by their unnatural enemy.

But while the boys who had escaped from the floating school and their hunted friend were making themselves comfortable on Indian Island, thrilling events were taking place on the floating prison.

Eric Lee had been guilty of a culpable oversight which must have already suggested itself to the more thoughtful of our readers.

We have stated that at the time of the departure of Eric and the two lads from the floating school Eric believed Bircham, whom he was duping, and who was allowing the boys to go with him, supposing he would drown them in the lake, might be on the watch.

In the face of this supposition, however, have we not seen that Eric allowed Warren Bennett, in his disguise of Hans, the Dutchman, to reveal the secret of his identity, so that a spy concealed on the deck within hearing might have overheard him?

In the excitement of the moment we must surely conclude that Eric overlooked the possibility that Bircham might overhear Hans, or Warren Bennett.

Had not this been the case it could not have been that Eric would have permitted his friend in disguise to utter a word that might convey a knowledge of his secret to the one man of all others against whom he most desired to guard it.

The actual truth was that Dr. Bircham was on the deck

when Eric and the two Sax boys left the floating school. He was concealed on the side of the deck in the shadow of the rail, but at some distance from the landing ladder, at the head of which the thrilling conversation between Eric and Warren Bennett had taken place.

Bircham witnessed the scene between the pretended Dutchman and his friend. He saw the former give Frank Sax the note. He witnessed all that took place. But he did not overhear a word of the conversation.

The school tyrant was amazed and mystified, and before he could decide what it was really best to do, Eric and the boys had rowed away.

When he had gained a moment or so of time for reflection, Bircham began to suspect something of the truth. "It must be that the Dutchman knew the jail-bird; of that I am sure. But admitting that if Hans meant to be true to me he would not have allowed the convict to escape with the boys," said Bircham, mentally. But he added:

"It is possible Hans meant to stop them, but that the jail-bird explained my connivance at the seeming escape of the lads. If not, I've been doubly duped. First, I shall assure myself once and for all as to whether or not the Dutchman is what he seems."

Bircham reflected for some moments; then as he saw Hans enter the cook's galley he glided across the deck and reached the companion-way. He then descended to his cabin.

A little later, as Hans and Jeff were seemingly, at least, asleep in the galley, Bircham came and awakened them to call Hans to relieve him on watch.

"The night is getting chilly. But here is something to warm you up and keep you from getting sleepy," said Bircham, and he handed Hans a flash.

The pretended Dutchman took it, and as he already knew that Bircham kept only the best liquor for his own private use, he unsuspectingly took a modest drink.

An hour later Hans lay sound asleep on the deck.

And he was not in a natural slumber.

The liquor Bircham had given him the old rascal had first drugged.

Presently Bircham stole to Hans' side. The school tyrant had a dark lantern in his hand. Placing it on the deck beside Hans' recumbent form, he muttered:

"Now to satisfy myself as to the truth of my suspicion that I may have been duped. I'll soon learn whether he is in disguise or not."

Bircham began his investigation at once. First he made the discovery that Hans wore a wig. Secondly, he found that he was facially "made up," as actors say.

"Tricked! This man is Bruce Baldwin's spy, by all the fates! He has learned all the secrets of the floating school. He has it in his power to give the information of the truth to the outside world and so ruin me," said Bircham, mentally.

He was intensely excited.

Rage and alarm rendered him so.

For a space of several moments he paced the deck. Then suddenly he paused beside the drugged man with an expression of ferocity upon his evil countenance, and hissed through his clenched teeth:

"You infernal spy! I'll send you to the bottom of the lake. This is a question of self-preservation. It is either you or I who must suffer!"

Bircham had resolved to consign to death the man who had come to save the boys of the floating school and expose the villain who was their cruel master.

He had determined, too, that his fate should be a secret, locked in his own heart only.

"I'll confide nothing of this even to Moon or Meter. With a weight at his heels I'll push him overboard while he is powerless to help himself in his drugged sleep," resolved Bircham.

In a moment or so he had bound a heavy iron bar to his intended victim's limbs. Then he lifted him bodily and hurled

him into the deep, dark waters. There was a splash, and the waves closed over the brave man.

Bircham glided away from the rail, and he said to himself:

"I've nothing to fear from him further. Now to show the signal and bring the fishermen on board. The boys will all soon be at my mercy. The fishermen will help me overpower them. A moment later Bircham flashed the signal light.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE ATTACK ON THE SCHOOL-ROOM.

The signal light flashed by Bircham was produced by enveloping an ordinary ship's lantern in a red handkerchief, and alternately disclosing and concealing it.

When this had been done three times, Bircham watched and waited anxiously for an answering signal from the fishermen's hamlet to tell him that his red light had been seen.

Soon the answer he expected came.

"Now to call all hands and be ready to receive the men from the shore!" said Bircham.

In a few moments, in answer to Bircham's shout, Moon and Meter came on deck accompanied by Bill Keen. Jeff came tumbling out of the cook's galley, and save for Hans the company of the floating school was all assembled.

All the ship's lanterns were lighted and Bircham's tutors knew what was coming, for they were in his confidence regarding his alliance with the fishermen.

"It's galling to think we must call on outsiders for help against a gang of mere boys. But the circumstances are against us, an' we've got to do it. In a short time now, if all goes well, the men from the fishing hamlet will arrive, an' then we'll make short work o' the task of subduing the mutineers, and I shall have plenty of work for the 'persuader,'" said Bircham, addressing the men.

"Whar am Hans?" suddenly asked Jeff, missing the presence of the Dutchman, as it seemed.

"Sure enough! Where is he? I saw nothing of him as I came on deck a bit ago. It was his watch," replied Bircham, feigning ignorance.

"Hello, Hans! Hans, you rascal, where are you?" he shouted.

But of course there was no reply, and an immediate search failed to reveal any trace of the presence of the German, as the reader need scarcely be informed.

"Well, well. This is surprising. The rascally German has deserted us just at the time when it appears we need him most," said Bircham, when the futile search was ended.

"It must be he is a champion swimmer if he makes the shore," replied Moon.

The absence of the boat, which Eric and the Sax brothers had taken, did not cause Moon or Meter to think Hans had appropriated it. Meter and Moon were both in the confidence of Bircham as to the plot to have the Sax brothers doomed by Eric.

But while the tyrant of the school on the lake and his tutors are awaiting the arrival of the fishermen let us visit the school-room in the saloon where the imperiled boys were.

The disappearance of Tom Sax had been discovered, and the boys were greatly excited.

They were inclined to think he had been mysteriously abducted through the hole in the floor.

Tom's young friends feared, and indeed they believed, that he was in the hands of their cruel, brutal task-master.

Dick Smith and Jack Decker were, in the absence of Frank and Tom, the acknowledged leaders of the school-boys.

To guard against the "spiriting away"—as Jack said—of any more of the boys, a watch was set at the hole in the floor, and a number of benches were placed over it.

"Well, boys, we have lost two of our best comrades in Frank and Tom Sax, but it's no use crying over spilt milk, as the

homely old saying goes. We will try to hope that our missing friends may be protected by Bruce Baldwin's secret agent, and look forward to our own final escape," said Dick Smith.

"That's all right, but Bircham will not allow things to go on in this way much longer. He'll be sure to hit upon some plan to overreach us soon. For my part, I'm losing confidence in the assurances of Bruce Baldwin's agent," said another of the boys.

"I've got faith in the man Bruce Baldwin has sent here even yet. 'The mills of the gods grind slowly, but they grind exceeding fine.' You remember that quotation, boys? Well, justice is often slow in coming, but she usually gets there all the same," replied Jack Decker.

"I move we make a break to-night," cried a reckless youngster. "Let us drop down into the hold one after the other, and charge the deck. We may as well fight it out with old Bircham and his gang first as last. If we all stick together we can drive them into the lake."

"But the chances are the villains have a watch set in the hold. The first one of our number who dropped down there might fall into a trap. I guess, too, we are none of us quite ready to squeeze through the window and try to swim ashore. I, for one, shall not try that until the food is all used up," said another.

The boys were thus conversing when the sounds of strange voices shouting from the water reached them. Answering cries were uttered from the deck, and the lads recognized the tones of Bircham.

All became silent while they listened eagerly, and it seemed that some premonition of impending calamity came to their minds.

"Come on board, men! We're ready!" were the words uttered by Bircham in stentorian tones which the boys heard.

Then the voices became lower and more indistinct, and the words of the speakers could not be definitely made out.

But the lads heard the sounds of heavy footsteps on the deck, and there was much tramping about.

"There are strangers on the old vessel! Can it be that Bircham has received reinforcements to use against us?" said Dick Smith.

There ensued an excited conversation. The boys were all alarmed. They feared that Dick had hit upon the true explanation of the arrival.

"What's to be done, boys, if we are overpowered? I'd rather be drowned than be again at the mercy of old Bircham and his brutal tutors!" cried Jack Decker, in desperate tones.

"And I! And I!" shouted a chorus of the lads.

Presently they heard men in the hold, under the hole they had cut in the saloon school-room floor.

Then there came a heavy "tramp! tramp!" of many feet along the passage leading to the saloon door, against which they had placed the barricade composed of desks and benches.

It was a thrilling and exciting time for the boys of the floating school.

All doubt as to what was impending was almost immediately set at rest, for Bircham's voice was heard shouting:

"Now, then, you young mutineers, surrender, or we'll break down the door! We've got a party of fishermen from the shore to help us, and it is no use for you to attempt to hold out longer!"

"We'll hold the fort to the last! You've got to fight to get at us!" shouted Jack Decker.

He was at the door as he spoke.

In his hand he held the "applicator," with which the pepper had been blown into the passage, when Bircham and the others made the previous attempt to force the door.

It was the lad's intention to use the instrument again. But to his surprise and consternation he found the keyhole had been tightly plugged from the outside.

This had been accomplished by Bill Keen.

Bircham had sent him down to the door of the saloon to plug the keyhole before the others descended.

Jack had barely time to tell his young comrades that he could not make use of the applicator when there came a crash against the door.

"Heavens, Jack! They will have the door down in a few moments, in spite of all we can do!" cried Dick Smith.

The hoarse voices of the fishermen were heard uttering desperate cries.

Bircham cheered them on with words of encouragement.

It seemed now that little short of a miracle could save the boys of the floating school from capture.

But the boys heroically prepared for desperate resistance, and the benches and desks, which had been placed over the hole in the floor, after the disappearance of Tom Sax, were removed.

Then they saw a light below, and a number of men on guard in the hold to prevent their escape in that direction. These were the men they heard.

The boys broke up several desks. A hatchet had been found in the storage closet, and the boards of which the desks were made were hastily split, and every lad was armed with a club, thus procured.

Meantime "Crash! Crash!" came the sound of some heavy object against the door, which was beginning to yield. The hinges were starting and the door could not resist the attack much longer.

Just inside the door the boys had a barricade of desks made, and clutching their clubs, they crouched behind it, waiting for the door to fall.

CHAPTER XIX.

BARTON SAX SENDS A HUNTER TO TRAIL THE FUGITIVES.

The party of fishermen who had accompanied Barton Sax on the lake and assisted him in the search for Eric Lee, were discharged and paid by the villainous lawyer when the shore was reached.

Barton Sax was disgusted with the result of his attempt, and the escape of the Sax brothers troubled him sorely.

He was inclined to blame Bircham, and after he left the fishermen, as he did immediately after he reached the shore, he reflected thus:

"How can it have happened that Frank and Tom escaped with Eric Lee from the floating school? Surely they could not have gotten off without the connivance of Bircham. The storm may have driven Lee to the old vessel, but he could not have successfully defied the authority of Bircham and rescued the boys. I must see the old villain of the academy on the water. He and I must have an understanding."

Barton Sax rode homeward in anything but a pleasant frame of mind. It seemed to him that the plot to rob the sons of his own brother was not destined to run as smoothly as he had counted on, since he had succeeded in placing Eric Lee in jail, and in getting the boys kidnapped.

The mercenary conspirator was beginning to learn something of the bitter truth that there is always some unexpected obstacle in the devious pathway of villainy and crime.

But Barton Sax was a man of stern, determined character, and he was in no case easily to be deterred from the accomplishment of a given object, once he had fully resolved upon its attainment.

His financial status was anything but secure. Unfortunate speculations, which promised large returns, had well-nigh ruined him.

At this time he found himself compelled to seek reimbursement from the fortune belonging to his two nephews or to go to the wall.

Barton Sax was a proud man. He could not bear the idea of a decadence from his present position of a magnate of the country side, which he held by virtue of his wealth.

He clutched his hands fiercely as he reflected upon the situation which affairs had now assumed, and he said mentally:

"I'll not be defeated yet! No, no! Bart Sax shall not be baffled by two mere lads and a poor clerk. I'll hunt them all down, and the boys shall go back to the floating school, if Bircham satisfies me he was not at fault in the matter of their escape."

Barton Sax had decided upon a plan of procedure, which he lost no time in carrying into execution. On his homeward route resided an old hunter called Black Gabe. He was said to have Indian blood in his veins, and he lived the life of a recluse in a lonely cabin in the woods.

Black Gabe gained a scanty livelihood by hunting and fishing now; but some years previously, when the country in the neighborhood was overrun by horse thieves, Black Gabe had done excellent service for the local authorities in tracing the rascals who were running off the best horses belonging to the farmers in the vicinity.

The old fellow owned a pair of bloodhounds at that time, and at the date of which we are writing he still had in his possession one of those fierce, savage brutes.

The other had been shot and killed by a desperate horse thief, whose trail the dog was following.

Black Gabe's bloodhounds were justly celebrated throughout the country. They had been trained by their owner to track human game in the days of the horse thieves.

When he arrived at the cabin of the old hunter Barton Sax drew rein.

The door of the log structure stood wide open, and late as was the hour of the night old Gabe had no fear of intruders.

He knew he had a trusty sentinel on guard at the open door—one whom the most stealthy prowler could not approach undetected.

Across the threshold, as he drew rein, the lawyer saw a dark form stretched at full length.

Suddenly it arose, and a tall, gaunt bloodhound stood revealed to Barton Sax's sight under the moonlight.

The lawyer's eyes glittered, his face assumed an expression of satisfaction, and he muttered:

"Good! He has the hound yet. He is the man to earn my gold, is old Gabe."

The hound uttered a low warning growl.

"Hello, friend Gabe!" called Sax, and immediately a tall, gaunt, dark-faced man, who seemed like a fitting companion for the great hound, appeared in the door of the cabin.

He placed one hand upon the head of the hound and said:

"Down, Wolf! Down, my boy, and watch!"

The dog crouched until his great jowls touched the ground, and his fierce red eyes became fixed upon the horseman before the cabin.

The sight gave Barton Sax an unpleasant feeling, for it seemed to him it would take but a word from Black Gabe to send the dog leaping forward to tear him from the saddle.

Gabe knew Barton Sax, but at the first glance he had not recognized the lawyer.

The latter now hastened to say:

"Send the hound away. He need not watch me. Don't you know me? I'm Barton Sax."

"Oh, ho! Yes, yes! So you are. Didn't know you at first, and that's the truth. Welcome you are. Go inside, Wolf! Go!" replied the hunter.

The hound arose and trotted into the cabin.

His master strode to the horseman's side.

The lawyer leaned forward and grasped Black Gabe's proffered hand.

Barton Sax had some knowledge of his man, which made him free to trust him. He knew that Black Gabe was none too honest, and ready to earn money at almost any price.

Barton Sax knew that in the days of horse stealing in that vicinity, Black Gabe might have joined the thieves, had he not found that it paid him better to help hunt them.

The lawyer came to the point at once.

"Gabe," said he, familiarly, "I've got a job for you and your hound. It will be money in your pocket."

"You can count on me, sir," replied the hunter.

Then Barton Sax went on to tell the old fellow he desired the capture of the two boys, Frank and Tom, and Eric Lee. He explained how they had eluded him on the lake and gave the hunter all the information which he thought would be of service to him.

In conclusion Sax said:

"What I want you to do is to locate the hiding-place of the fugitives and then report to me. You can do your work secretly, and I'll see that they are arrested."

"I understand. I'll take the trail. I'll cross the lake as soon as possible with the hound, and if they landed I'll run them down," replied Gabe.

Barton Sax placed a twenty-dollar note in the old fellow's hand as a retainer, and then having admonished the hunter to make all haste in his man-trailing task, the lawyer rode on homeward.

He had good reason for not visiting the floating school that night. He did not wish too many of the fishermen to know he had business there; for he feared they might be used to testify against him if his great plot failed.

As soon as Barton Sax was gone, the old hunter shouldered his rifle, thrust a knife in his belt, and, followed by the hound, set out for the lake-shore.

He owned a boat, which he kept concealed at the mouth of a small inlet. Entering this, with the hound, he rowed across the lake. Then he located, as nearly as possible, the point where Barton Sax supposed the fugitives to have landed.

Then he set the dog to hunt the scent. But the task was vain, of course. Black Gabe and his dog patrolled the lake-shore for several miles.

Finally the old fellow said positively:

"They never landed on this side o' the lake. They fooled Bart Sax, but they can't fool me. Where would they be likely to hide? If they haven't run for one of the islands, I'll miss my guess. Indian Island is the nearest one; I'll pull over there, and give the hound a run. If they're there, he'll send 'em out," muttered the man, and very soon after that he was rowing for the land where our friend were concealed. They were menaced by a peril they did not suspect.

CHAPTER XX.

A THRILLING CONFLICT ON INDIAN ISLAND.

The dawn was almost at hand when Black Gabe landed on Indian Island.

He sought the mouth of a small inlet, with whose location he was familiar, and which was situated at a distance of less than half a mile from the place where Frank and Tom Sax had landed with Eric Lee and concealed the boat belonging to the floating school.

Having taken the precaution which he never neglected, no matter how slight the danger of thieves might be, to hide his boat, the hunter began his investigation intelligently.

It was his theory that the fugitives had landed on the side of the island which he had now reached.

So he led the hound along that side of the island, keeping near the water.

It was not long before the hound struck a trail.

Then his master let him take his own course.

The hound went toward the interior of the island and, in accordance with his training, he uttered no sound, save now and then a low whine.

Old Gabe held his rifle across the hollow of his left arm, and the weapon was ready for immediate use.

Presently master and hound were crossing a rude piece of ground, where the recent great rain-storm had left the earth soft and impressionable.

Suddenly the keen-eyed old scout, whose eyes were fixed on the ground, paused and uttered a low exclamation.

A word fell from his lips and the intelligent hound at once crouched like a setter before a quarry.

Old Gabe knelt down and scanned the ground.

He saw a clearly defined footprint, and it was that of a man and freshly made.

But there was only one track.

"There should be three set o' tracks if this is the right trail. I don't just understand this. Well, I'll let the dog go on. Maybe this single trail will lead me to the parties I'm after," mused the hunter.

Then he went on, following the lead of the hound.

The animal was never once at fault. He followed the trail which was invisible to human eyes—beyond the barren space—by his wonderful instinct.

Suddenly he again came to a "set."

He had paused at the edge of a dense thicket.

Old Gabe knew the quarry was in the cover.

He came up to the hound and placed his hand on his collar.

Then he went on with the animal. A moment and there was a crash in the undergrowth. A human form shot forward.

Old Gabe made a leap at the flying figure of the man who was seeking to pass him.

A heavy cudgel which the unknown carried was raised. A swift, terrible blow was dealt, and as the man trailer was in the act of leveling his rifle, the club crashed down upon his skull.

Old Gabe was knocked senseless.

At the same moment the hound made a terrific leap at the stranger's throat.

The man aimed a blow at the hound, but the animal eluded it.

The next moment man and dog were on the ground engaged in a desperate struggle.

They crashed through the undergrowth, breaking down the bushes and tearing up the leaves on the earth as they fought.

The light was growing all the time, and as the terrible struggle went on between the man and the hound the sun appeared above the distant horizon.

But it seemed that day had dawned for the last time for the man who was desperately fighting for his life with Black Gabe's man-hunting dog.

He had exhausted his strength.

He was at the mercy of the fierce hound, and old Gabe, lying motionless and inanimate for the time, was unable to call off his dumb champion.

The stranger tried to shout. But his voice died away in an inarticulate gurgle, as the hound made a "crunch" at his throat.

It was an awful scene.

But suddenly Frank and Tom Sax, followed by Eric Lee, came rushing into the thicket.

The light was now distinct enough to enable them to discern objects clearly.

The trio beheld the man and the hound, and they also saw the motionless form of old Gabe lying on the ground a few feet distant.

They thought they had stumbled upon the scene of some dread tragedy.

As Frank beheld the face of the man who was engaged in the battle with the hound a startled cry escaped his lips.

"Good heavens, Tom!" he exclaimed. "This is Ralph Sax, our cousin, and Barton Sax's runaway son!"

The next moment Eric Lee leveled the rifle which the trio had found in the sportsman's lodge, and which he had brought with him from that cabin.

He took a quick aim, and the sight covered the hound just back of the left fore shoulder. Then Eric pressed the trigger. The bullet sped, and the hound leaped into the air and floundered away into the bushes with the rifle ball in his heart.

The man on the ground raised himself on one elbow and stared at his preserver. He was a young fellow of twenty odd years, with a bold, wild face, upon which dissipation had set its stamp indelibly.

We have taken occasion to mention in the opening of the story that Barton Sax had one son—a wild, reckless fellow, of whose whereabouts his father had no knowledge.

As Frank had said, the man Eric's bullet had saved from the hound was he.

"Heavens!" he panted, as soon as he could get his breath. "Have they then taken to hunting me with hounds? I didn't think they had heard of my crime here. I was going to father. Oh, you won't give me up, will you, Frank and Tom? You won't send one of your own kin to a disgraceful doom?"

Frank and Tom both knew that Ralph was a wild, reckless ne'er-do-well, but they did not know that he was a criminal.

"What have you done?" asked Frank.

"Never mind what I've done. Suffice it for me to say I've got to get out of the country. I meant to see father secretly and get the money I need. I only came here to hide for the night. It will kill him to have his name disgraced by me and see me, his only son, dragged to—to—" Ralph faltered, and after a pause, added:

"But, never mind. Let me know what you intend to do. You have saved my life from the hound. Will you keep the secret of my presence in the neighborhood?"

"Yes!" cried Eric Lee. "We will keep your secret for the present, but you are my prisoner. I'll explain what I mean later."

Ralph sprang to his feet. Eric turned his rifle upon him.

The double-barreled weapon yet contained a missile of death.

"Bind him, boys. He's dangerous. You'll find cords in my right-hand coat pocket. You need only secure his hands behind his back. Then serve old Gabe the same way!" cried Eric.

"But—but. Really I——" began Frank, much surprised at Eric's order.

"It's all for the best. I tell you, our safety depends on you doing as I say; make haste," interrupted Eric impatiently.

Frank entered no further protest and neither did Tom. But they quickly bound Ralph as directed and then bestowed the same attention upon old Gabe.

Scarcely was the old man secured when he began to exhibit signs of returning consciousness.

In a few moments he completely regained his senses.

Then he managed to get on his feet.

The first thing he seemed understandingly to see was the dead body of his hound. Then he uttered a savage yell, and struggling to free his hands, vowed he would have the life of the man who had slain his dog.

But as his hands were securely bound he could not free himself, and he was presently compelled by his captors to march along with Ralph to the sportsman's lodge.

CHAPTER XXI.

A PLAN TO COMPEL BARTON SAX TO MAKE RESTITUTION.

When the lodge was reached Ralph and Black Gabe were marched into it by their captors.

"Now, then," said Eric Lee, "you may as well make the best of the situation, for here you are and here you will be compelled to remain until we allow you to go."

"I'll have the life of the man who killed my hound!" grated the old hunter, fiercely.

"What is your purpose regarding me?" asked Ralph, anxiously.

"You shall know presently; but not to keep you in suspense, I'll say now that no harm is intended you."

With this remark Eric signaled to Frank and Tom to follow him, and he withdrew. Eric paused outside the door of the lodge, and the boys joined him. Tom, who came last, closed the door, and the men within could not overhear the conversation which ensued.

"You are perplexed at my conduct?" said Eric to his boy comrades, smiling.

"Indeed we are," assented Frank.

"I should say so. What in the world are you up to, I'd like to know, anyhow?"

"Well, I'll explain, boys. You see, I know Barton Sax's character pretty well, having been his clerk for so long a time. He is a proud man, and his one redeeming trait—if indeed he has any—is his love for his wayward son Ralph."

"Yes. That's so," assented Frank, while Tom nodded affirmatively.

"Well, then, don't you see the drift of what I have in mind? We have Ralph here a prisoner. One word from us will cause the arrest of Ralph; his punishment and disgrace as a criminal will follow. What think you Barton Sax would do to prevent that?"

"Almost anything!" exclaimed Frank.

"So I think, and I am counting on that. Now, my plan is briefly this: We will make Ralph's safety the price of your father's fortune. To shield Ralph I believe Barton Sax will surrender it. For all we know it may really be the price of his only son's life."

"Bravo! I like the plan. But how shall we negotiate with Barton Sax?" said Frank.

"I'll attend to that. I'll have Ralph write a note to his father and I'll deliver it. Barton Sax will not dare attempt any treachery with me under the circumstances."

"You are a shrewd one, Eric. But don't you mean to make Barton Sax establish your innocence?" asked Frank.

"I certainly do. You have the letter he wrote to Bircham, Frank. I'll take it with me when I visit your worthy uncle, as I certainly shall do secretly very soon. That note is the evidence against him of a murderous plot. He will weaken when I demand a retraction of his accusation against me, or promise that I will make public that letter."

"So I think. We'll baffle the arch villain yet, if all goes well, thanks to you, Eric," assented Frank.

"And it may be a great triumph," cried Tom, who was already very hopeful of the future.

"Indeed it will. But now to return to our prisoners. We must keep old Gabe a captive simply because if he was allowed to go now he would no doubt betray the knowledge of our hiding-place. Wait!" said Eric.

He had suddenly lifted his hand in a warning signal, and he at once stole back to the door of the lodge. He fancied he heard Ralph and old Gabe talking.

Such was the fact.

Placing his ear to the key-hole, Eric heard old Gabe say:

"So you're Bart Sax's son? Well, you kin rely on me. The fact is, I was sent by your father to hunt down Eric Lee and your two cousins with my hound. You keep your eyes and ears open, and maybe we kin give the young rascals the slip yet."

Eric waited to hear no more, but noiselessly returning to Frank and Tom, he told them what he had overheard, and added:

"Now you see the necessity for keeping old Gabe a prisoner is doubly apparent."

The boys assented, and then the trio re-entered the cabin.

Eric tore a leaf from a blank book Frank had in his pocket, and produced a pencil.

Then Ralph's hands were unbound and Eric informed him of the plan he had formed to save him at the price of the inheritance which was Frank's and Tom's right.

Ralph was selfishly anxious to secure himself, and he did not hesitate about writing the following letter at Eric's dictation:

"DEAR FATHER:—Under an assumed name I have committed a crime for which I am being hunted, and if caught, I'll go to State prison. I am now in the power of Eric Lee, and Frank and Tom Sax. If you do not make terms with them, you doom your only son. Save me this time, father, and I solemnly promise to reform. Your son,
RALPH."

When the letter was written Ralph was again bound.

Then the fugitives waited for night to again fall.

Eric stated that under cover of the darkness he meant to visit Barton Sax the ensuing night.

The day passed quietly. Nothing occurred to disturb the island fugitives.

The boys speculated regarding the state of affairs on board the floating school. They were anxious regarding the fate of their young comrades there, and they hoped that Warren Bennett, who disguised as Hans, the Dutchman, had become Bruce Baldwin's secret agent—would soon come to the island with a good report from the boys of the prison on the lake.

Shortly after darkness fell the boys were left alone at the sportsman's lodge to guard the two captives there, and Eric took their boat and rowed away, bound upon the perilous mission of seeking a secret interview with Barton Sax.

Eric cautioned the lads to be vigilant. He warned them that in old Gabe they had a cunning and dangerous man to deal with, and that he might attempt some crafty ruse to outwit them and make his escape.

The boys promised to watch the prisoners closely, and not without some misgivings as to what might occur during his absence, Eric rowed away from the island.

He made the shore on the side of the lake nearest the village of Valeville, and set out through the fields to make his way to that place.

* * * * *

That same evening Barton Sax sat alone in his office. A couple of hours later, suddenly the door opened and a full-bearded stranger entered.

The lawyer arose, and inviting the man to a seat, asked what way he could be of service.

"You are Barton Sax?" asked the man, remaining standing.

"Yes, sir."

"You have a son named Ralph?"

"Yes—yes."

"Well, sir, it is my painful duty to inform you that I have a warrant for his arrest on account of a robbery committed in Buffalo. Though he passed under an assumed name, I have found out that the young man I want is your son, and I have traced him to this neighborhood. I have no doubt you are hiding him. I am a Buffalo detective, and I demand the surrender of Ralph Sax."

Barton Sax dropped into a chair. His face paled, and a look of real misery came upon his features. It was true that he loved his wild, wayward boy better than anything else in the world. For a moment the blow made Barton Sax speechless. But finally he found his voice, and said brokenly:

"My poor boy! My only son! Oh! that he should bring this disgrace upon me! But, sir, I assure you I know nothing about him. I have not seen him in months. I pledge you my word, sir, I cannot tell you where to look for him."

The officer, who knew mankind, was sure that the man before him spoke sincerely, and he said:

"I believe you, sir, and you have my heartfelt sympathy. But duty compels me to arrest your son. I will leave you to continue my quest for him."

The next moment Barton Sax was alone. He bowed his head and thought bitterly. But only a few moments elapsed, and then the door was again opened.

Barton Sax started to his feet and found himself confronted by Eric Lee.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE DOWNFALL OF A VILLAIN.

Barton Sax sprang back with a start as he beheld Eric Lee, and his consternation and surprise was denoted by his look.

Eric Lee calmly closed the only door of the office and placed his back against it.

"You here, Eric Lee!" exclaimed the lawyer, finally.

"As you see. Yes, Barton Sax, I am here to bring you the most startling news."

"Confound your impudence! You have foolishly walked into a trap. I'll have you sent back to prison!" cried Barton Sax.

As he spoke he advanced toward Eric threateningly.

"Stand back!" cried the young man, in determined tones.

"Stand back, I say. You have got to hear what I have come to say."

The knife with which Eric had successfully menaced Bircham on board the floating school suddenly appeared in the young man's hand.

With an exclamation of alarm the lawyer recoiled before the glittering weapon.

"What have you to say to me?" he demanded, and as he remembered that he was unarmed and judged Eric by the standard of his own character, he became very much alarmed.

"I have a letter for you," replied Eric, and as he spoke he extended the note written by Ralph.

Mechanically, as it seemed, Barton Sax took the missive, and while he read it Eric watched his face.

The young man had been at the office door while the Buffalo officer was within. He had heard all he and the lawyer had said, and so he knew Sax would not doubt the truth of the statement contained in his son's letter.

"Where is my son? Where is Ralph?" demanded the lawyer, when he had read the note to the end.

"Where I can at any moment surrender him to the officers of the law unless you make terms with me. More than that I will not say until we have arrived at a satisfactory understanding."

"What do you mean?"

"Restitution."

"Speak plainly."

"I demand, as the price of your son's safety, as far as myself and your nephews are concerned, that you make restitution of the fortune you have dishonestly deprived them of."

"How dare you accuse me!"

"Do not take on any innocent dodge with me. Rest assured I have not forgotten that you sought to induce me to make a false will that might serve to prove that your nephews' father died penniless. Come, yes or no? Does your son go to prison? Is your name to be disgraced? Will you have the inheritance you have stolen at such a price?"

Eric spoke with thrilling earnestness.

Barton Sax was intensely agitated.

He made the transit of the office nervously, while he struggled to make up his mind what to do.

Eric Lee, meanwhile, felt pretty well assured that he would win the battle for the wronged boys.

Finally Barton Sax paused before Eric.

"I accept your terms," said he.

"And will you surrender Frank's and Tom's inheritance?"

"Yes. To save my son and the disgrace of my name."

"How will you convince me of your good faith?"

"By giving you the means to prove that the boys' father left them a fortune unencumbered."

"Can you do that?"

"You shall see."

Barton Sax crossed to a safe, and, unlocking it, he opened the door, and in a moment or so turned to Eric again with a legal-looking document in his hand.

"This is the real will of Jerold Sax, the father of Frank and Tom."

"Then you did not destroy it, as I supposed you had?"

"Examine it for yourself."

While he kept a close watch on the treacherous lawyer Eric did so.

The paper proved to be precisely what Barton Sax said it was. Eric carefully read it and then he said:

"This is all right."

"Then you can establish their claim by it in spite of all I can do. But I pledge you I will surrender the boys' inheritance without compelling them to have recourse to law."

"Very good so far. Now one point more. You know you falsely accuse me of the robbery of your safe. You have got to secure my complete vindication of that charge, or I'll make public the fact that you are at heart a murderer!"

"What! Are you mad? By heavens, you go too far! Retract that accusation!" cried Barton Sax, grasping one of the office chairs, as if he meant to hurl it at the young man.

"Never! It is the truth!"

"You lie!"

"Hold! I am not here for useless wrangling or vain accusations. Proof I have of the truth of my words."

"I deny that."

"Then you deny your own writing."

"What mean you?" replied Barton Sax.

And now his bravado began to give way, as he saw an expression of triumph on the other's face.

"What do I mean? See here! Do you recognize this?"

As he spoke the young man produced the letter Barton Sax had written to Dr. Bircham, in which he tacitly directed that the murder of his two nephews should be committed.

Eric held the letter open so that the lawyer might see its contents.

He did so. He knew that the evidence against him was complete. As a lawyer he knew such silent testimony would convince any jury. Of course his handwriting was well known. It would not require expert testimony to prove that he was the writer of the missive that might be construed as the death warrant of his nephews.

Barton Sax sank into a chair.

He knew he was beaten. But at the same time he could scarcely bring himself to acknowledge the defeat.

"Come. The price of this note is my vindication. Will you purchase the papers at my price?" said Eric.

"Yes," came reluctantly from Barton Sax's pale lips. "Yes. I'll vindicate you. I'll show that you were innocent."

"Then write some statement to that effect. I do not require much of a confession. A simple statement of facts."

Barton Sax turned to his desk with an air of desperation, and seizing a pen, hastily wrote for some moments.

Then he handed the paper to Eric, who read it carefully.

The paper was a confession that the young man knew would fully prove his innocence to all the world.

He folded it up, and placed it in his pocket.

"Promise me you will not make that paper public for a period of twenty-four hours," said Barton Sax.

"I promise," replied Eric.

And now you have conquered, Ethel Barrington will be your bride, my nephews will have their inheritance, and I—I—well, no matter, the world is wide. I am a ruined man; I must start life anew."

He paused and added:

"Now, about Ralph. I want to meet him as soon as possible."

"You shall do so. Come with me, and I will arrange a meeting," replied Eric.

Then he and Barton Sax left the office. While he was constantly on his guard against his companion, Eric conducted him to a certain point on the lake shore. There he left him and rowed to Indian Island.

Reaching the island, Eric secured his boat, and proceeded swiftly to the sportsman's lodge.

As he approached it he began to have some misgivings. There was no light in the windows.

Though he uttered a signal whistle, which had been agreed upon between him and the boys, it was not answered.

Arriving at the cabin door Eric hastily opened it. Then he recoiled. The moonlight revealed the interior. The cabin was empty.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE REVOLTING SCHOOL-BOYS DEFEATED.

The situation in which we left the revolting boys of the floating school was one of great peril.

They were, so to say, hemmed in by the enemy.

It seemed that there was no escape for them and that they must soon be overpowered by Bircham and his allies.

No wonder that, as they heard the blows crashing against the door of the saloon school-room and saw the door yielding before the attack of the enemy, their hearts sank as they crouched behind the barricade of benches.

Surely if Bruce Baldwin's secret agent was to make good his promise of protection he must come now or it would be forever too late. The boys waited for the door to go down.

But the boys did not know, of course, that the tyrant of the floating school had detected Bruce Baldwin's secret agent and sent him to the bottom of the lake with a hundred weight of iron attached to his heels.

"Crash, crash!" came the heavy blows again upon the door, and suddenly the barrier between the poor boys and their cruel jailer was broken down. The door fell and the ruffians of the lake-side, led by Bircham and old Dan Bronson, thronged into the school-room.

In a moment, as the invaders charged the barricade of desks, a hand-to-hand contest between them and the boys who were rendered frantic by despair, ensued.

The fishermen shouted and swore, and before the burly ruffians, the boys were beaten back, after a short, hot conflict, and driven into a corner, where they were disarmed and overpowered.

Then was the hour of Bircham's triumph.

The old wretch was villainously rejoiced, and pointing to Dick Smith and Jack Decker, whom he had seen assume the leadership of the lads, he said:

"Bind them two young mutineers hand and foot, men. I'll take hold o' them first an' then settle with the rest o' the young pirates."

Despite despairing efforts at resistance which Dick and Jack kept up to the last, the fishermen pounced upon them, and they were soon bound as Bircham directed.

Then, by his order, four stalwart ruffians carried the boys on deck, while the others remained to guard the conquered boys.

Dick and Jack gave themselves up for lost. They believed they were to be drowned, for they thought Bircham was quite capable of any crime, no matter how desperate it might be.

But such was not the fate the cruel tyrant meant to mete out to the boys.

His cruel nature made him wish now for victims to torture, and he had selected Dick and Jack to feel his wrath.

"Put them in the black hole!" ordered Bircham, when Dick and Jack had been brought on deck.

He led the way to the terrible pit, opened the trap-door and stood glaring at the two boys against whom he had issued a merciless mandate.

He expected to hear his boy victims beg for mercy. But he was disappointed. The boys remained silent. White-faced,

with set lips, and an expression of horror in their eyes, they were lowered into the terrible black hole.

Then Bircham closed the door above their heads, and as he did so he hissed vindictively:

"Stay there until I order your release. You are doomed to a hundred days imprisonment on a diet of bread and water!"

The boys knew he might as well have said that he had doomed them to death. They knew no one could live long in the black hole.

A strong man might have experienced feelings of the keenest despair under such terrible circumstances as these, and the two boys, brave fellows as they were, believed that the outlook was hopeless.

"Bruce Baldwin's agent has failed us! We are indeed lost!" said Dick, as he and Jack crouched in the darkness, at the bottom of the black pit.

"Yes, we trusted to one who was not competent to save us. But I wonder what has become of Frank and Tom Sax. I had supposed if they were in Bircham's power, he had consigned them to this terrible prison place," replied Jack.

"That's what I thought. But I dare not hope that the Sax boys have escaped, or that help may come through them. Indeed, I dare not hope for anything now."

While the boy prisoners of the black hole continued to converse so hopelessly, Bircham and the men who had brought Dick and Jack on deck returned to the school-room in the saloon.

Then Bircham addressed the boys there assembled thus:

"The first thing you will do is to go to work and straighten up the room. Then we'll call school to order. I'll then see that the regular exercises of the academy are resumed, and from day to day such punishment as I may decide on shall be meted out to you. Rest assured, none of you will get off without being taught a lesson that will last you as long as you are on the floating school. Oh, none of you will want to turn mutineers again."

There was a refinement of cruelty in all this. The poor boys were thus left in doubt and suspense as to their fates. It would have been more merciful to let them know what they had to expect at the outset.

The boys set to work, in obedience to Bircham's orders, and soon put the school-room to rights.

Bill Keen looked on and taunted the lads. The treacherous boy was now in high favor with Bircham, and patting him on the shoulder the old fellow said:

"From this day I promote William Keen to be an assistant tutor, as a reward for his faithful conduct on my side against you young ingrates. William, when we begin to mete out punishment, you shall use the 'persuader' some of the time."

Bill Keen grunted maliciously, and expressed his satisfaction at the prospect.

Bircham believed the boys were now thoroughly subdued. They were not allowed to leave the school-room that night, and the fishermen remained on board until dawn.

Then Bircham paid and discharged them.

The regular routine of school exercises were then resumed the following morning. Meanwhile, when the attack was made upon the school-room by Bircham's allies, Jeff, the darky, was conspicuous by his absence.

When Bircham hurled the disguised man overboard with his feet weighted with the iron bar, a man witnessed the terrible deed, and that man was Jeff, who was crouching near the door of the cook's galley, in the dark shadows.

As Bircham withdrew the darky put a knife between his teeth, and dove over the rail. He sank below the surface, but almost immediately he came up again with the body of the disguised man in his arms. In a moment the herculean darky had carried his burden up the landing ladder, and concealed him in the cook's galley.

With a few strokes of his knife, while under water, Jeff had severed the cord that bound the heavy weight to the feet of the man Bircham had doomed.

While the attack was being made on the school-room Jeff was with Warren Bennett, or, as we have known him best, Hans, the Dutchman. The secret agent was revived. But he was weak and faint. The drug Bircham had given him made him ill. By his advice Jeff assisted him down to the hold of the vessel, and there he concealed himself.

"To-morrow night I was intending to make a coup which I arranged with another. I shall be well enough to make it yet if all goes well. The hour of Bircham's downfall and the liberation of his boy prisoners shall surely come yet," said Warren Bennett.

Bircham was yet destined to be called to account, it seemed, by the very man he firmly believed he had sent to his doom at the bottom of the lake.

CHAPTER XXIV.

CONCLUSION.

Thus it came about that the day, which was passed uneventfully by the fugitives on Indian Island, passed quietly on the floating school. Jeff secretly brought Bennett food, and the agent of Bruce Baldwin bided his time.

By nightfall he was quite recovered.

From the first there had been a secret understanding between him and Jeff. The darky was really an honest fellow, as Bennett had discovered at the outset, and he had promised to assist him in the good work which he had come to the floating school to perform.

During the afternoon Jeff was sent to the fishing village on an errand by Bircham, in an extra boat which the men from the hamlet had left at the floating school.

Before Jeff took his departure he visited Warren Bennett, and the pretended Dutchman gave him a note and certain instructions, which he repeated several times in order that no mistake might be made.

Upon reaching the village Jeff attended to the errand which Bircham had sent him on, and then the darky moved away along the shore and into the shadows of the high, wooded banks to the westward of the hamlet.

"I reckon I'll done see de big dead tree what Massa Bennett done tole me ob pretty soon, an' if dat young gemman what he done 'scribe to me am dar I'll know him fo' suah," muttered Jeff.

Then the darky rested on his oars and chuckled to himself. There was something very amusing to the darky's mind.

"Golly!" he said to himself, "I'se bettin' high dat dar will be a heap ob fun on dat old hulk on de sand bar fo' long. Lordy, won't dat old Bircham jiss bust hisself when he done see Jeff's friend dat pretended fo' to be a Dutchman! 'Specks dat old rascal will think fo' sure he am a ghost," he muttered.

Jeff resumed the oars.

And as he rowed onward he continued to mutter and chuckle to himself in evident delight in anticipation of events which were to come.

Presently he sighted a large dead tree near the bank, and pulling toward it, he shot his boat into a little cove. At the same moment a fine, manly-looking lad of seventeen, who was standing under the tree, stepped forward.

"Dat's him—dat's de young gemman, Bruce Baldwin, what Massa Bennett done tole me to gib de note to!" exclaimed Jeff, so loudly that the young man heard his words.

"Yes," replied he, smiling, "I am Bruce Baldwin."

"Den I'se got a note fo' you, sah," replied Jeff, and he leaped ashore, made fast his boat, and hastened to give the youth the message.

Bruce Baldwin read his agent's note, and then he exclaimed: "Good! My father's old friend has accomplished all he promised. He has sufficient evidence against Bircham, and he tells me, in accordance with our previously arranged plans,

to come with the officers to-night. More than that, the note tells me of the escape of the two noble boys, who, with the friends who saved them, are hidden at Mr. Bennett's fishing lodge on Indian Island. He asks me to go there and bring the boys with me when we raid the floating school, that they may witness the downfall of the villains there," said Bruce Baldwin, more to himself than Jeff.

Then the lad hastily wrote a note in answer to the one he had received from Bennett, and gave it to Jeff. The darky then rowed away for the floating school, which he reached all right. A few moments later Bennett was reading Bruce Baldwin's note.

* * * * *

Not long after the departure of Eric Lee from Indian Island to visit Barton Sax, Bruce Baldwin arrived there in a large boat accompanied by eight officers from the next large town south of Valeville.

They landed and made their way at once to the lodge. Bruce Baldwin made himself known to Frank and Tom, and stated his purpose. It was decided to remove the two captives and leave a note for Eric. A message explaining that the boys had gone with friends to witness the arrest of Bircham and his men was written and placed on the little camp-table in the lodge. Then, taking Ralph Sax and old Gabe with them the party rowed away from Indian Island, and the boat was headed for the floating school.

While the voyage was being made Frank and Tom Sax related to Bruce Baldwin all the stirring events which had recently transpired on the floating school.

* * * * *

But to return to Eric Lee.

For a moment he was completely dumfounded at finding the lodge empty. Then he saw the note on the table by the light of the moon which streamed in through the open door. Eric hastened to read the message, and then he returned to his boat and rowed as swiftly as possible for the academy on the water.

* * * * *

Meanwhile thrilling incidents were transpiring there. Jeff was on the watch when Bruce Baldwin's boat approached, and Bennett was concealed in the cook's galley.

Bircham and the two tutors were below deck, in the principal's cabin, drinking and making merry over their victory. The poor boys of the prison-school had been locked up for the night in the dormitory.

Jeff put down the landing ladder, and Bennett came from his hiding-place as Bruce Baldwin's boat reached the old vessel.

With little noise the rescuing party boarded the vessel. Bruce Baldwin and Bennett shook hands warmly, and a brief consultation ensued. Then the whole band stole down to Bircham's cabin. Bennett led the way, still in his make-up of the Dutchman, as he had looked when Bircham threw him into the lake.

Reaching the door of the old rascal's cabin, Bennett suddenly threw it open and rushed inside, followed by Bruce and the others.

Bircham uttered a cry of terror as he beheld the man he thought he had consigned to death, and he shrieked:

"Away! Away! Don't touch me with your dead hands! Merciful Heavens! The spirit of the dead has come to accuse me!"

"No. A living man has come to see justice done and punish the guilty. I have here a warrant for your arrest, Bircham, and also for the arrest of your two tutors," replied Bennett.

"Officers, do your duty," cried Bruce Baldwin.

In a moment, then, the men of the floating school were overpowered and handcuffed.

Bircham saw Frank and Tom Sax, and he fairly raved in rage and alarm as they confronted him.

Almost immediately the poor boys of the school were re-

lieved from the dormitory by Bruce Baldwin, and then such a scene of rejoicing as was seldom witnessed anywhere took place on board the prison-school, for Dick Smith and Jack Decker were rescued from the black hole without delay.

The boys asked Bruce Baldwin for an explanation of how he had worked to save them, and he said:

"After I escaped I was picked up in the lake by an honest fisherman, who rowed me to the shore; then I made my way to my father's friend, Mr. Bennett, whom you have known as Hans the Dutchman. I related my story, and at once won his sympathy. The secret of my escape was kept from my cruel step-father, who, by the way, died yesterday, and so will trouble me no more. The plan which has succeeded was arranged. It was agreed between Mr. Bennett and myself that he should come here in disguise and remain a certain time to secure evidence. Then, on a certain day, which has now come, I was to come with a company of officers. A warrant for the arrest of the men of the floating school was previously sworn out."

There were some further explanations, but we need not record them.

But a short time later Eric Lee reached the floating school. The officer who had arrested Bircham and the tutors did not know anything about Ralph Sax's crime, and Eric was allowed to take him to the place where he had left Barton Sax. Eric

witnessed the meeting between father and son, and then he joined the rescue party on the floating school again.

In the morning Bircham and his tutors were taken to the town jail and there imprisoned to await the trial. Old Gabe was set free. The boys were taken off the prison-ship and sent to their respective homes. Many of them had been sent to the school by parents or guardians in good faith.

Barton Sax and his son Ralph were never more seen in Valeville. They fled to parts unknown. Eric Lee was vindicated and his innocence proclaimed everywhere, for Barton Sax's confession proved the clerk was not guilty.

Under their father's will Frank and Tom, who chose Warren Bennett for a guardian, obtained their inheritance, and their future was bright and happy.

There was great general public indignation when the real truth became known about the floating school. There was strong talk of lynching Bircham and his tutors, but cooler counsel prevailed, and they were ultimately tried, convicted and sentenced to imprisonment for a term of years. In the meantime some one set fire to the old vessel which had served as the floating school, and it was destroyed.

Something less than a year subsequently Eric Lee and Ethel Barrington were married, and among the most honored guests at the wedding were Frank and Tom Sax, Bruce Baldwin and Warren Bennett. Honest Jeff for many years after remained in the service of Warren Bennett.

THE END.

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